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BY THE AUTHOR OF

“SIX MONTHS HENCE,” “BEHIND THE VEIL,” &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CHAPTER I.

"THIS is the last will and testament of me, John Rayner; by law and right, of Stanton Court, Earlsford, in the County of Kent; but in actual abode of No. 17, Carr's buildings, Pentonville.

"I appoint my son, Malcolm Rayner, my executor, and bequeath to him the small property now left to me, reduced as it has been by the Chancery suit of 'Rayner v. Rayner,' and by the expense of our joint maintenance since the iniquitous decision in that suit.

"And I hereby direct that the brief in

the said suit shall be kept by my son, and handed down in his family for ever, in perpetual memory of the treachery of Paulina Rayner, and the wrong which has robbed me and mine of our patrimony.

“I desire at the same time to attest my conviction that neither my late brother, nor his daughter, were responsible for what took place. Evelyn will be the gainer by her step-mother’s wickedness, but I am satisfied that she had no share in it. And my poor brother, whom I forgive from my soul, was a mere tool in the hands of his implacable and remorseless wife. Dated this 14th day of January, 18 . . . John Rayner.”

Strong language this for the dying man !—for John Rayner deceased shortly after penning it ;—words wrung from the heart’s core of the injured litigant.

Yet there they survive; "of record," as the phrase goes, in the Prerogative Court of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Not indeed admitted there without a sharp struggle; for the parties reflected upon felt aggrieved, and contended that, if the will itself were allowed to be proved, its denunciations should be expunged. But they were unsuccessful. And the dead man's protest still lives, crying aloud, from the archives to which it has been consigned, against the evildoers and their triumph; swelling the pile of earth's unredressed wrongs.

For there had been a wrong, and a very wicked one. Not one of legal technicalities, not, in itself, implicated with law at all; a heinous moral outrage of deep dye.

Meanwhile, the generation which witnessed it has passed away; perpetrator and sufferer sleep beneath the sod alike.

The story may now be publicly told ; and with it, the results to which it led.

The former, as briefly as may be : it is past and bygone for all time. The latter at more length ; dealing with younger life, opening up from the overcast dawn the sunshine and laughing hours of the noon.

Even the sensationalisms of fiction cannot be tragic throughout ; how much less this, which is a real history ?

CHAPTER II.

OF the wrong first; although, as we have said, in comparison but briefly. It is of the essence of our tale, and, as such, must not be passed over. But, like other essences, it is as compressible in itself as it became expansive in its consequences.

Earlsford is a Kentish village, standing on one of the streams which the chalk back-bone of the county sends down northwards to the Thames. It has its church, and a few cottages; and little else, excepting the keep of a dismantled castle. In the seventeenth century, the feudal building had been replaced by a more

convenient structure at some distance ; and at the time when our retrospect begins, thirty years before the date of John Rayner's will, this was tenanted by his father, Philip Rayner.

Stanton Court, as it was named, was a charming residence. The chalk stream wound under bluffs of hill ; oaks and beeches, every stem a history, swept down to it from the mossy glades at its side ; the Tudor house, the most picturesque within twenty miles, was as comfortable as if it had been in Eaton Square, and the estates were ample to keep it up. Ample, and wholly without incumbrance ; acres on acres which the Rayners had held from father to son, time beyond memory, without once leaving on them the family mark of borrowed money. So that Philip Rayner had reason to be a happy man.

Well, he was not the reverse ; far from it. But he had one trouble. It did not

“spring out of the ground,” as Scripture touchingly words it; but it came to him by the most direct of secondary approaches; through his own progeny.

Philip Rayner had two sons; John Rayner, the elder of the two, and the testator of the preceding chapter; and Charles. Both had been born to him in advanced life. Long and ardently had Philip Rayner desired male issue; but the wish was not gratified for many years after his marriage, and the gratification brought some pangs with it.

Children are not an unmixed blessing in all cases. We have our character, and they have theirs. Sometimes, a wholly contradictory character, which is unpleasant. Sometimes, too close a copy; which, as it is less indulgently viewed than the original, is more unpleasant still.

Now, Philip Rayner's two children,—he was left a widower soon after the birth of the

second,—involved both these elements of discomfort. Charles, the younger, was a puny, somewhat sickly boy, and retained the same qualities in after life. He was not unamiable, much the reverse; but he was wholly without heart for the hard riding and boon living of Stanton Court; “no use,” as Philip would often complain to his eldest-born, John.

Then, as to John. He was “of use,” undoubtedly; the best shot in half the county, reckless, genial; all that the paternal nature delighted in. But, with this, he had inherited the paternal temper too: and this led to untoward consequences.

If Philip Rayner had one settled conviction in the world, it was that his will should be law. He was himself intensely sensitive, vulnerable by word or even look; this lay side by side, as apparently inconsistent qualities often do lie together, with

his social proclivities. But it never occurred to him that other people might have sensations also ; least of all, his own sons. Let Philip decide that a thing was to be done, and done it must be ; that John Rayner or Charles Rayner, of all people in the world, should oppose him in it, even when they were themselves concerned, never entered his thoughts. He did not intentionally outrage any feeling they might have in the matter ; he simply ignored its existence.

Unfortunately, however, this was not John's own view of the position. As he grew up, he dissented from it more and more. Let obedience be exacted, and John would yield it readily enough ;—always provided that the circumstances squared with his own wishes. Should they fail to do so, John was less tractable ; and then a collision would ensue.

John refused ; the parent threatened ; choler beget choler ; mailed words, grievous

of endurance, sprung up like the sown dragon's teeth. John left the room, or was ordered out of it, seeking a congenial retreat with some friend at a distance. The old man was first frantic, then querulous; then vented his irritation on Charles; then tried to extract comfort out of him in other ways; finally, failing in this, let John know, through indirect channels, that the home of his forefathers was not hopelessly closed against him; in fact, that he was wanted back there. Thereupon John would return, half penitent, half triumphant, and be received with open arms. The causes of strife were dismissed to some limbo of forgetfulness; peace and amity were re-instated; and things went on as before, until some fresh divergence of will induced a new feud, to be waged on the same model, and supplemented by the same results.

This was the normal state of affairs at

Stanton Court ; and for some years it continued to be so. But the time came at last when these oscillations between war and peace ceased abruptly, and left the ultimate condition—war. The gates of Janus were to stand open to all time !

John Rayner married.

Nothing in matrimony itself to exasperate the paternal mind : John might have had twenty wives, had the law permitted, and welcome. But then, they must have been all of his father's choosing. And one wife, at least, had been chosen for John ; open to be won, good-looking, the heiress, in reversion, of a property which "marched" with Stanton Court, and would have combined with it into a small principedom. Everything that could be desired, if John would only have accepted the choice.

But this was precisely what John would not do ; he was neither to be coaxed nor

threatened into Miss Molyneux. Eventually, he took a course which disposed of her pretensions altogether; he married some one else.

A very charming girl indeed; one for whom he had always entertained a liking, which the determination to have his own way in the matter, like a tropical sun, stimulated into love. But a girl without position or prospects; the daughter of a general practitioner in medicine in the next post town. Sadly out of rapport with Stanton Court and its surroundings!

So much out of rapport, that from the day of his wedding to that of his death, twenty-four years afterwards, John Rayner and Stanton Court were entire strangers. He never again crossed its threshold; never saw it but once, when, as will appear further on, he followed the old man's remains to their last resting-place.

Nor was this the only result; banish-

ment and confiscation went hand in hand. The estates were entirely in the father's power, and he exercised it without ceremony. John wedded the apothecary's daughter; and before the Caversham bells had done ringing for the event, Philip Rayner had sent for the attorney. The fly in which Mr. Miles was driven to Stanton Court emerged from the George yard just as the bridal cortége was returning to it. Instructions for a "settlement" of the property were drawn up the same afternoon.

No need to trouble the reader with the details of this; nothing turns upon them. Philip Rayner of course kept the ownership as long as his own life should last: then Charles was to take, and any widow he might leave after him, with an "entail" on his children. John, his wife, and his and her progeny, if any, were left out in the cold shade altogether. There was a power

for Philip Rayner to “revoke” the settlement, that is, to alter or do away with it, if he thought fit; but this was not very likely to be exercised! In less than a fortnight the instrument was executed, and John’s disinheritation was a fait accompli.

One only fragment of good fortune did survive to John Rayner. Mary Greaves, as she was when she married, Mary Rayner as she was now, had some small succession on her late mother’s side; and the income of this maintained them while John was setting his wits to work in quest of occupation.

A hard enough quest, as the reader may perhaps know. Toil and disappointment; toil and disappointment. We have no space for the particulars, and, grievous as they were, the occupation did come at last.

John Rayner had no profession; knew nothing of books, and still less of lan-

guages. But he had a gift which now stood him in good stead. He drew well; animals best, and dogs and horses best of all. John's water-colours got some local patronage; occasionally found their way into London exhibitions, and, once or twice, found purchasers there. Seeing this was so, John removed to London also.

But he had better have stopped where he was. The country orders had come in freely, but in town John was lost; his pieces were clever, but not sufficiently above the average to ensure custom. He eked them out with lessons, however; and between the two, and with the aid of his wife's income, lived in moderate comfort. But we must return to Charles.

As Charles was to be, practically, the heir, his father now pressed matrimony upon him also. Not Miss Molyneux; she had disposed of herself elsewhere. Not,

in fact, any one of the old man's own choosing ; he had learnt a lesson upon that score, although he would not have admitted having done so even to himself. Charles's inclinations were left free, only with the understanding that they must culminate somewhere, and without much loss of time.

The difficulty was for Charles to have any inclinations at all. If he particularly cared for anything, it was beetles : a variety of which he had amassed at different epochs, and devoted himself, when energy was redundant in him, to repinning, re-assorting, and cataloguing. As for a wife, he decidedly shrunk from the idea : not with repugnance, exactly, but with a good deal of vague apprehension.

However, Charles looked about, and eventually made a choice. Not an unprosperous one, had circumstances permitted ; the wife he fixed upon was a

sensible, domestic woman. But the union was a short one. A daughter was born, "Evelyn:" then decline set in, and, in the second year from his marriage, Charles was left a widower.

By special desire of the old man, the married couple had resided at Stanton Court; and Charles now lived on there with Evelyn. But he might as well have been at Timbuctoo. He fretted for some time, then relapsed into listlessness; as company, he was of less use than ever. From his granddaughter Evelyn, Philip did extract some satisfaction; but there was none to be got out of his son. He began to have strange yearnings after that other son; the banished, disinherited, unrepentant John!

But this was wholly out of the question: Philip would not have acknowledged the yearning in the most remote region of thought even. Things must be made the

best of as they were. Might not Charles remarry ?

Time wore on : several years ; the grief of his bereavement, never very acute, had wholly passed from Charles's mind. No obstacle existed to his doing what he had done before ; associating some new life with his own, which might bring sunshine to the house, and the chances of a male succession to the estates. Two or three times, the old man sounded him upon the point. But with no form of pressure ; he shrunk from applying this as heretofore ; and, without pressure, Charles would not move. The father's suggestions were respectfully received, but that was all ; they led to no results.

Philip Rayner might have acquiesced in this less patiently, but for a discovery which he made about this time. It related to the settlement made at the time of John's revolt. His thoughts often

recurred to this; as they did, whether he liked it or not, to most other memories of that period. And, one day, he took out the instrument from his deed-box, and ran his eye over the contents; the first time he had done so since it was executed.

Mere idleness this, of course! Philip knew the contents well enough. Special idleness, too, that his eye should rest, so long and nervously as it did, on the "revoking" power at the end. That clause, at all events, would never come into operation; small likelihood of it, while the person who might benefit by it sued for no pardon, exhibited neither remorse nor contrition; gloried in his contumacy! Folly even to have given it a thought! Back with the parchment where it came from!

In folding up the instrument, however, Philip's eye was caught by some words which he had never observed before; at least, had given no special attention to;

something about his, Philip's, "own right heirs." Surplusage, in some shape, he had always considered this; legal phraseology, for the most part, meant nothing, and probably this did not. But on the present perusal, he felt less confident: his brain became exercised on the point. Let him ask his solicitor.

Seventeen years had elapsed since the deed was executed, but Mr. Miles was still living, and explained as requested. Subject to the entails, the effect of this was to give Philip Rayner himself the absolute reversion; he might alienate it; leave it by will; do what he liked with it.

"And supposing he did none of these?"

In that case, Mr. Miles stated, "and assuming the failure of Mr. Charles Rayner's male and female issue," the property would revert to . . .

Mr. Miles stopped short at the name, but that was of small consequence; no

need for Philip to be told it. The sentence remained unfinished : some trifling business, which had been made the pretext for requesting his solicitor's attendance, was dispatched ; and Philip Rayner was left to ruminate.

So that was the position, was it ? One feeble life only in the way ? Let this girl of his younger son's fall a prey, as she might any day, to disease or accident, and then *the* right heir would come back again ! Come back, and bring with him the apothecary's daughter who had defied Philip, thrust herself into the family, driven his favourite son from him ; bring herself and her issue with her ! Had he not better provide against the contingency ? Easy to stop this last earth ; make his will, as Miles had suggested, and devise his property to his twentieth cousin ; give it to a Jew's synagogue, rather than have this scorn put upon him in his grave !

Had the point arisen for decision some years back, Philip would probably have done this. But the seventeen years had brought change with them. They had allowed, as we have said, the old love for the eldest-born to creep back to the father's heart, coil by coil; and they had altered matters out-of-doors as well. This last change must be briefly noticed before our résumé closes.

The "apothecary's daughter" acted better than she might have done; she did not crown her offences with a large family. It appeared likely that she would; in the first two years of her marriage with John, two girls were born, but both died in infancy. Then the next year a boy followed, christened Malcolm; then, after him, there were no more births. And Philip Rayner's wrath, unconsciously to himself, abated in proportion. When a woman marries your son against your will,

every child multiplies the provocation ; the olive-branches bring wrath instead of peace ; the more there are of them, the oftener you are being contradicted. But let them be few, or the number be thinned out, and resentment becomes a thing of the past.

Besides, there was another healing element. Report spoke well of this boy Malcolm ; just fifteen now,—a year older than his cousin Evelyn,—active, enterprising, all the Rayner blood in him ; very different to the luckless Charles ! Report had to reach the grandfather's ears through alleys and byways ; but he took care it *should* reach him. And Malcolm, at all events, had not sinned.

Altogether, Philip Rayner decided there should be no will ; the settlement should be left to work itself out as it might.

“ He will have been punished enough in any case,” was the thought which crossed

his mind ;—the “ he,” of course, being the recreant John. “ Wholly unlikely that he should survive both Charles and Evelyn, so that his folly will have cost him the property for life, at all events. Then afterwards, should anything happen to the little girl, and the law take it to her cousin Malcolm ;—well, let him have it, as far as I am concerned. Besides, Charles will remarry ; he ought to do it ; he must. I will speak to him again about it.”

All which notwithstanding, Charles was not spoken to. Four years more passed, and Stanton Court still went on in its loneliness.

But then came a change here also. The event which its owner half desired and half did not, was brought about without reference to his wishes either way.

The details of this, however, belong to a

new chapter. We say “details” advisedly, for the rapid sketch hitherto given of the Rayners and their fortunes must now be exchanged for narrative. Up to the present point, our notice of persons and events has been preliminary only, although necessary. The main actors must now appear, and work out the drama for themselves.

CHAPTER III.

IT is a fair face, undeniably, which is looking out of the balconied front-window of the Domo d'Ossola posting house, this October morning. Domo d'Ossola, as all the world knows, is the first town on the Italian descent of the Simplon; and La Posta is, or was, its leading hotel.

A fair face; delicately moulded; faultless in complexion, and never shewing to better advantage than when it rests, as it is now doing, on the small, ivory-white hand. But it is not a good face; something instinctively warns you of that. Something *false* about it!

The owner is in her prime of early womanhood, but that writing is already there. And there is something else written there too; force of will; unflinchingness. Paulina, or, as she was christened, Paolina Guidi, is not, on nature's own showing, a person to be lightly taken to one's heart and home! She has much to attract, in addition to her rare beauty; intellect, some softness, much grace of manner. But it may fare ill with the man who yields to these seductions. Let him bear the coveted prize across his threshold; plant it beside his hearth, amid the familiar Lares, in the sanctuary of his own inner life;—and he, and others, may repent it to all time!

It *may* be thus: everything would depend upon the man himself. Paulina has force, but not the hegemonia of other forces. To a robust nature she would succumb in her turn; might possibly be moulded to good, or, unquestionably, over-mastered for

greater evil. But let her wed weakness in any shape, and she will tyrannise; subjugate; drive rough-shod to her ends over the conscience and heart enthralled to hers, as Tullia did over her father's prostrate corpse.

And to this latter consummation, this wedding-portion of the weak, things seem already tending.

Charles Rayner had been ailing; lung disease, or some threatening of it; and he was ordered to winter in Italy. It was already September, so that arrangements had to be made in all haste.

Evelyn, it was settled, should not accompany him. She was still under eighteen, and the Brighton school at which she had passed the last two years put in its claim for some finishing touches. At Christmas, she would be free of it, and, when the hunting was over, might reappear at Stanton Court; but not until then. The interval was to be spent with a married

sister of her mother's, a few miles out of London. But we return to Charles Rayner.

His destination was Rome, and he took the route by Geneva, an English servant accompanying him. The first sod of the Continental iron roads was still unturned, and the journey was made by post or diligence. At Geneva, the Simplon was reported "open"; and, after resting there two days, Charles started for Milan.

Bright and clear the weather continued, although cold, as far as Brieg; then, when the flats of the Vallais were left behind, and the road became one of curves and gradients, things altered for the worse. It was still early in the forenoon, but the sky had become ominously overcast. Would the snow hold off until they were over the col? Hard to say.

History speaks of a man who came from India in two ships; and the Milan dili-

gence this day consisted of two distinct vehicles. The Continental traveller was never left behind for want of room; "supplements," as the term went, were attached as needed, and the whole was still the "diligence." The component parts, however, did not always maintain their relative order; and, on this occasion, the supplement, which had been put on at Sierre, and carried two ladies with light luggage, took the lead on the first opportunity; the diligence, properly so called, lumbering heavily in the rear.

The same order was maintained when the hospice on the summit was reached; reached almost unexpectedly, for the clouds trailed up in heavier masses than ever. Then at Simplon, some distance down on the Italian side, the horses were changed, and only two stages remained to Domo d'Ossola. But the enemy was upon them.

A few white flakes fell as the diligence, now far behind its companion, drove out of the village. No more than this for some time. Looking back from the angle which the road makes before dipping to the "galerie" d'Algaby, the features of the view were much as usual; still the landscape of late summer.

But once through the tunnel, and it was another matter. The gorge of Gondo, through which the road here worms its way, is one of the most savage in the Alps, a celebrity as such; precipices of black rock overhead, the stream penning you in to the cliff-side, and the mountain above, which has discharged acres of débris into the ravine, threatening every moment to send more. And to-day it looked more savage than ever, for heavy snow had fallen, throwing the rock into still stronger relief. And in the strip of sky above there was the promise of another downfall.

The diligence made the best of its way, but it was weary ploughing. The relief was unspeakable when the next galerie was reached, pierced through a projecting spur of rock; the rapid movement, as the horses trotted over the two hundred yards of clear roadway, was like coming to life again.

But it was their last trot for that day. The further end of the tunnel was blocked by a snow-drift which had to be dug through. Spades and mattocks had been provided at Simplon, and they were used with good-will; the cascade of Frascinodi, which descends just outside the galerie, clattering and roaring in front as the work proceeded.

But it was too late; exactly as they emerged, the storm began again: this time, the well-known *tourmente* of the Alps, dense and blinding as a mist, and obliterating in an instant every trace of

road. The diligence still persevered; it was the only thing to be done; but the catastrophe was inevitable. In turning a corner, the track was missed, and the horses plunged over the side, almost disappearing in the snow.

"How far is the next post?" asked one of the passengers, who were all walking.

"Further than we shall reach to-night, or to-morrow either," said the conductor, who was addressed. "The next post is Isella; two leagues."

"Is there no place nearer?"

"There is Gondo," said the conductor, "but that is half-a-league; and little enough of it when you get there. Ma foi, but we must try."

"Could we not get back into the tunnel?" suggested another voice.

"And be caught like a rat in a trap: caged in at both ends. Merci, non." And

the speaker proceeded to force his way through the snow.

“But the diligence; shall we not dig it out?” asked a third passenger, a Milanese jeweller, who had valuables among the luggage.

“Try if you will,” answered the guard. “Man can die but once, and that way goes straight for the next world. *Moi-meme*, I prefer the less direct route by Gondo.”

The case was too clear for contradiction, and the jeweller struggled on with the rest.

A fight for life or death, short as the distance was; the conductor was quite right. The *tourmente* had spent itself, but the snow-drifts were piled across the ravine, yards high in places; there was the cliff to keep the direction right, but that was about all.

The “supplement,” meanwhile, had been

more fortunate; its start had taken it on to Gondo before the storm commenced. Nothing could be less promising than this place; a score of wooden cottages, huddled together on a level patch left by the stream, and maintaining an auberge of the most homely character. But it proved a friend in need to the two travellers; things outside the hamlet looked still more unpropitious than itself, and when the tourmente once began, there was no choice.

The ladies thus driven to shelter were Paulina, and her mother, the Contessa di Guidi, widow of a Neapolitan nobleman of old family but reduced fortune. The Contessa was herself English, and Paulina, although born and educated in Italy, spoke both languages. At present, mother and daughter were returning home from a tour north of the Alps, "home" being Amalfi: the Contessa's married life had been spent at Naples, but prices there did not tally

with the very moderate income which remained to her as a widow. But we must return to the Gondo auberge.

The landlord did his best for such unwonted guests. Meat, or even eggs, there were none. There was butter and cheese, and some very salt and very black bread; still better, fuel was abundant, and the single guest-room of the auberge possessed the luxury of a grate. Altogether, when the meal was served and the logs kindled into a blaze, the room, barring some normal Italian features, looked fairly comfortable.

The occupants were retiring for the night when the first stragglers from the diligence appeared. Charles Rayner was not amongst these; the struggle to reach Gondo had utterly exhausted him, and he collapsed half a mile short of it; lay down and could not be induced to move.

His servant behaved well, and, finding

he could not rouse him, called for help. "His master was rich; would pay liberally; would no one come?"

The words were English, but they translated themselves; money is of all tongues. Two of the rotonde passengers, mechanics from Vogogna, turned back, and the conductor joined them soon afterwards.

Charles was far gone in drowsiness, and drowsiness, in such circumstances, means death;—better perhaps for him had it done so now. But it was not to be. Brandy was poured down his throat, and he was forced to rise; then the stout arms which had come to his aid, partly dragged, partly carried him to the entrance of the village. Here the stimulant took effect, and he was able to reach the auberge without further assistance.

Rumour soon spread that the passenger who had been so nearly lost was a wealthy Englishman. The only passenger of condi-

tion that day. The rest were bourgeoisie, and took possession of the kitchen, contentedly enough; but on Charles's behalf the landlord appealed to the two ladies. "Milord Anglais; great family; enormously rich: would their ladyships allow him to share their sitting-room?"

Permission was granted, and Charles entered.

And in that poorest of hostel-chambers, warmed by pine-logs, and lit by its solitary dip candle, he found his doom awaiting him.

It may have been surprise; contrast to the scene without; the exhaustion of recent toil; impossible to say. The result which was to follow did follow. The Contessa had arisen to receive their visitor; Paulina remained seated. Her eyes met those of Charles as he entered, and the effect on the latter was instantaneous. The latent flame woke up within him, emotions

unfelt, unsuspected; the hitherto impassive nature was stirred to its depths!

It was some moments before Charles Rayner could withdraw his eyes; he stood like a man in a trance, marvelling at the rare beauty which confronted him. Then he faltered out some apology.

“We are English ourselves,” said the Contessa, interrupting the half-formed Italian of this utterance. “But you should not speak at all; the landlord has told us of the peril you have just run. Pray be seated, and I will see that supper is brought.”

We must not linger on the evening, momentous as it was. Supper, such as it was, did appear. Half-an-hour’s conversation followed, discussing the incidents of the day, the prospects of its successor: then the ladies withdrew. And, with them, light and warmth, almost the very life seemed to vanish; the room shewed

itself in its native squalor ; the ice-fang of the tourmente struck anew through pulse and vein.

Well, oh ! Greece of elder days, mightest thou enshrine love as a divinity ; wiser than Athene ; more worshipful than Apollo ; stronger than the cloud-compelling Zeus !

Meanwhile, Charles Rayner did not escape other consequences of the day's adventure : a weak chest is not benefited by out-door exercise in a snow-storm. Next morning he was decidedly ailing.

“ Weak and feverish-like,” was his servant's reply to the question anxiously put by the Contessa ;—a friendly, simple-hearted woman, very little de-Anglicized by her foreign domicile, and whose sympathy had been enlisted by some reference which Charles had made overnight to the object of his journey.

“ He has been coughing a good deal, I fear,” said the Contessa. “ I hope we may

be able to leave this wretched place before long.”

No, no hope for that day, at all events. The road was reported clear below Crevola, but between that place and Gondo it would have to be cut; nothing on wheels could leave the hamlet for at least twenty-four hours.

The Contessa consulted with her daughter, and sent up to request that Charles, who had not yet appeared, would share their sitting-room again, if so disposed. Charles was over-joyed; and the rest of that day was passed in the companionship which, in his present frame of mind, and notwithstanding some premonitions of serious illness, was enchantment. On the following morning he sent for a carriage from Isella, and the ladies, at his urgent entreaty, shared it with

him to Domo d'Ossola, where they found quarters at the Post. The next day, it was arranged that they should pursue their journey together to Milan.

This however proved out of the question. During the night, some of Charles Rayner's worst symptoms recurred, and the physician who was fetched forbade his travelling for at least a fortnight. He was only partially confined to his room, however; and as the Contessa prolonged her own stay at the hotel, Charles spent his evenings with her and Paulina. On the day with which our chapter opens he was to pass the forenoon with them also; he had mended much, and had asked leave overnight to do so.

It was granted readily enough. To the Contessa Charles had made himself exceptionally agreeable; developing animation and social power which would have astonished Stanton Court beyond measure.

And Paulina ?

Well, let her speak for herself ; we have kept her at the front window of the hotel long enough. Charles is expected down in half-an-hour, and the Contessa has just entered the room. The latter, it should be added, has, within the last day or two, awakened to symptoms of something going on which has caused her uneasiness. Paulina's relations to herself are in the main those of independence ; not absolutely such, for their small income is at the mother's disposal ; but still, within the limits thus constituted, substantial independence of thought and action. The present, however, is a serious matter ; and the Contessa has resolved to speak about it.

“ What are you looking at, Paulina ? ” she asked, after observing her daughter for a minute or two in silence.

“ Looking at, Mamma ? ”

“Yes. You were so absorbed by something in the street that you did not hear me enter.”

“The fruit-women, perhaps,” said Paulina, carelessly. Now that she did really see external objects, the grape-laden stalls were the first which impinged upon the retina.

“I should not have thought them specially interesting,” said the Contessa.

“No, Mamma; but then, Domo is not an interesting place. I do not quite know why we have stayed on here.”

“Well, my dear, we are not pressed for time; and as we had arranged to travel with Mr. Rayner, it seemed only civil to remain until he was stronger. I almost regret having done so, though,” added the Contessa after a pause. She was an outspoken woman, and approached her subject more abruptly than she had intended.

“Why so, Mamma?”

“I think you must know why, my dear child. I am not very observant in such things; I never was; but you can hardly have failed to notice Mr. Rayner’s manner to you lately. It is most marked.”

“He is polite, and so on,” said Paulina.

“‘So on’ means a good deal in this case, Paulina: it may mean mischief if you are not careful. He will fancy you are giving him encouragement.”

Paulina was silent, but the cheek shewed a shade more colour than usual.

“He seems amiable,” resumed the Contessa, “and it would be grievous to mislead him in any way, especially in his state of health.”

Paulina spoke at last. “Why should I mislead him?” she asked.

“There is no reason why you should; but there is serious risk of it. He is evidently thinking a good deal of you.”

“That is not my fault, Mamma.”

“ I think it is, my dear child. I am not speaking for your own sake ; you have given your heart elsewhere, and may be only amusing yourself, as you think. But it may be a cruel amusement to him if it goes on.”

Again there was a pause. Paulina was still seated at the window ; gazing from it more fixedly than ever, her face wholly averted from the speaker. Some strong feeling was at work within her, and it was long before it would find utterance.

“ I am not engaged to Mr. Luxmoor,” she said at last.

“ Paulina !” exclaimed her mother, in the utmost surprise. “ No,” she continued, almost indignantly ; “ no, you are not engaged to him. He was so honourable that, in his present position, he would not fetter you in any way. But you cannot mean that you are repenting of your attachment to him ?”

“No,” Paulina answered, again after some hesitation.

“I trust not, indeed,” said the Contessa; “I trust not : it would pain me more than I could tell you.”

“You opposed it at first, Mamma,” said Paulina.

“Certainly not, ‘opposed,’ Paulina. You have nothing of your own, and I regretted that your choice should have fallen on a poor man, estimable as he is. Mr. Luxmoor has barely enough to maintain him while he is learning his business at the Naples house here ; and when he returns to England at Christmas, it is only as clerk in a merchant’s office. But it was your own choice, and when I found your mind was made up, I would not stand in the way of it. You cannot have forgotten your time together at Amalfi last summer.”

“Of course that is all right, Mamma ;”

said Paulina, who still retained her sullen attitude.

“I will not doubt it, my dear child,” said the Contessa. “You may have been a little thoughtless, but I am confident of your heart being in the right place; very likely too, you may not have noticed what I have. Only, just be guarded with this gentleman for the short time we shall still be together; it is due to him as well as to yourself. There, I hear him coming down now.”

Charles Rayner remained with the ladies to the utmost limit required by courtesy, and a good deal beyond it. He took his leave at length, asking, and obtaining permission, to join them as usual in the evening. When he quitted the room, the Contessa did the same, and Paulina returned to her window.

A tumult of thought was in her heart, and she could not refrain from its audible expression.

“Not noticed !” she exclaimed recurring to the Contessa’s last words ; “that is not very likely ; a baby could not help noticing. But it has not been my fault ; I told Mamma so ; it was his own doing from first to last. Not far off, too, the ‘last’ now, I fancy ; a day or two will bring things to a crisis. Of course, I shall not accept him ; how can I, after that unfortunate business ? No, I didn’t mean that ; of course, I like Stephen Luxmoor as much as ever ; only this would be *such a* chance ! Not the man himself, he has neither heart nor brains that I can see ; but one could put up with that for the sake of

“That is not my fault either,” Paulina continued, breaking off her sentence as the current of reflection changed abruptly ; “not my own fault. It was not my own thinking of at all ; it came into my mind quite suddenly that evening. ‘Enormously

rich,' the landlord said. Yes, that they evidently are; and the county position, too; one of the oldest families there! How cruel it seems! Why, with Stephen it will be years before we can marry; and then it will only be some dismal place in a London suburb, knowing nobody!

"Of course I shall keep to it," Paulina resumed after a new pause, during which her thoughts, although busily at work, had failed to shape themselves into definite expression: "Mamma need not have been afraid of that. But I *am* free, if I choose; what was the sense of there being no engagement if I am not? It is a shame to say it. As to shunning him, I shall do no such thing; why should I? He will not break his heart, in any case; people never do. I am sure Stephen would not do that.

"And, really and truly," Paulina proceeded, after a still longer pause, during which the bell rung for the table d'hôte,

“really and truly, it might be best for Stephen himself if it *were* broken off. I shall only be a clog to him, and so he would come to feel before long. I must think this over.” And Paulina descended to the dinner table.

* * * * *

There is something very strange in temptation; strange in its variety of aspect. To some it comes as the result of long specific training, so to speak; the sin has been tampered with in thought, in word, in trifling acts. But with others it strikes home at once, fastening with terrible precision on some weak point in the character, some latent, undetected mischief. The trial is really perhaps equal in both cases; but the sides of approach are different. Probably this constitutes its essential danger.

With Paulina, temptation had come in

this latter form. In that Gondo auberge, in the companionship which had commenced there, her whole future had been changed; the suggestion of a great evil had come upon her. This wealthy Englishman of whom the landlord had spoken; his undisguised, increasing, admiration for herself; the circumstances which had thrown them thus together; what did it all mean? *What might it not mean?*

Paulina was fascinated. A new world had dawned upon her, a new star risen upon her firmament. Up to that time, her aspirations had been bounded by the life she had hitherto known; the narrow Italian home, with its economies and shortcomings; her mother's society there; latterly, Stephen Luxmoor's suit. But these things seemed barren and cheerless now. "Great family!" "Enormously rich!" Had she really any such chance?

Of course, from any true woman's heart

the suggestion would have glanced off, leaving no trace of its impact. But Paulina's was not a true heart. She was not wholly bad; who is, or can be, at twenty-two? But the nature was a selfish one, fortified by no higher aims, trained in no habit of self-discipline. It had, underlying it, this capacity for falsehood; treachery to itself first, and then to others. It was now tried in its very depths; — and found, wanting!

The result had not followed all at once, but it was none the less sure on that account. Step by step the battle had been waged; but there had been no pause, no retrogression: and now the decisive moment was not far distant.

CHAPTER IV.

Two days later, the travellers had started southward.

The Contessa would gladly now have proceeded without Charles Rayner. Notwithstanding Paulina's assurances, their conversation had left a painful impression upon her. She was a straightforward, sincere woman, and felt by no means satisfied as to her daughter's proceedings. If Paulina was merely amusing herself with their present companion, this was unfair to him; and any alteration of purpose as regarded Stephen Luxmoor would be still darker treachery.

Escape, however, seemed impossible. The weather had brightened into summer again, and Charles Rayner's recovery was rapid in proportion. He could perfectly bear the journey now, and the Contessa could not recede from their arrangement without stating some reason; and yet, what producible reason was there? Nor would Charles now have accepted his dismissal. He was thoroughly roused; hung upon Paulina's lips and smile; devoured with his eyes the very ground she trode upon; grudged every moment spent apart from her!

Paulina herself might have dismissed him, no doubt. Quite easy for her to elude his attentions, or shew that they were distasteful to her. And this the Contessa, notwithstanding appearances, still hoped that she would do.

But Paulina did nothing of the kind. Flirtation or earnest, she gave her admirer

all the chances he could desire; no displeasure, no rebuff. Let Mr. Rayner be deluding himself as he would, Paulina would do nothing to disabuse him. And what could any one else do?

So when the vettura drew up to the hotel door, the Contessa, concealing much inward anxiety, entered it with her two companions. The morning was exquisite; and at Vogogna, the first stage from Domo d'Ossola, Charles, who was in the highest spirits, proposed an alteration in their route. "Instead of following the direct road to the Maggiore, let them diverge to Orta, and spend a couple of days viewing the lake and scenery there. They could then either return to the main road at Gravellona, or strike across to the lower end of the Maggiore."

The Contessa was greatly disturbed

by this suggestion, and did her best to combat it; but ineffectually. Charles extolled the seclusion, the rare beauty of Orta; undertook the adjustment of matters with the vetturino; and finally, although with perceptible nervousness, appealed to Paulina.

The appeal was successful. Paulina did not actually second him; "would prefer to do what her mother wished"; but admitted that "Orta was a temptation. And we poor females," she added, with a smile of ominous fascination, "can hardly hope again for the chance of visiting it so pleasantly."

The words added fuel to the flame. Charles Rayner's ardour was redoubled, and the Contessa was compelled to give way. The sunset that evening was watched by the travellers from the balcony of the Leone d'Oro at Orta; looking across the miniature quay and flashing waters of

the lake, to the pinnacled Isola di san Giulio, with its background of dusky mountain peaks.

Next day, cloudless skies once more; the weather still warm as July. The forenoon was passed in visiting San Giulio; dinner was served at one o'clock; when this was despatched, Charles, whose energy seemed to increase with the demands upon it, proposed the ascent of a rising ground above the town, studded with the oratories of St. Francis of Assisi.

The Contessa felt she ought to be of the party, and prepared to be accordingly. But nature, or fate, were too strong for her. When Paulina entered the room equipped for walking, she found that her mother, after some feeble attempts at conversation, had sunk into a profound slumber.

The good lady woke indeed, and strove to rouse herself. But with the effort came new drowsiness; images of the morning's

sight-seeing seemed to blend with the hot afternoon haze without. After a few struggles, the Contessa sank back on her couch, and announced that she must be left behind. "After all," she murmured, as her eyes again closed in slumber, "it is no use worrying oneself about it: the mischief has been done already. Better perhaps that he should have it out with her. She will refuse, and there will be an end of it."

The hill of the Oratories rises in terraces, laid out as a pleasure garden; gourds and fig-trees shading its slopes, with the white chapels gleaming between their foliage. The tourist season was over, exceptionally fine as the month was; and of the natives, there were no curious eyes to note their progress. An occasional devotee passed in or out of the chapels, or knelt at one of the stations of the Cross by the roadside; but these worshippers

were absorbed in their own thoughts, and in the more secluded avenues were not to be seen at all. Paulina did not walk by Charles Rayner's side, but behind him; he offered his arm, but she declined it, and let him lead. She was trembling a good deal: quite perceptibly enough to make her glad that he should not watch her.

Since the review she had taken of herself and her own intentions at Domo, Paulina had shunned thought of any kind; thrust it from her. As the Contessa saw, she had not avoided Charles Rayner, quite the contrary; her manner to him was more encouraging than ever. But she had been trying to escape from herself! "I shall not accept him if he does propose;" so she had soliloquized at Domo. But with a dishonest nature, the moment in which it assures itself it will resist is often that in which it is preparing to succumb.

And that Paulina would succumb, she

knew well enough. But she could not quite stifle conscience; could not quite help this trembling. It was a wicked, treacherous act she was bent upon! She did not love this Charles Rayner, not in the least; despised him rather. And she did love Stephen Luxmoor; not, of course, with the real abandon of woman's love; *that* would have vetoed the treachery at once;—but with such love as Paulina was capable of. He was a grand fellow, nobly built, nobly endowed; Paulina's eye admired his exterior, her intellect did justice to the man himself. And yet, the moment had now come when she would renounce him!

They reached a portion of the grounds, commanding an exquisite view, but en-

tirely screened itself. Here Charles Rayner waited for his companion to join him ; in her agitation she had fallen some yards behind. Then, when she came up, they stood looking down on the fair scene together.

Island and lake ; the wooded banks dotted with the white campaniles of the villages ; behind them the snow mountains, close enough, one might have fancied, for the hand to touch them ; the whole lapped in the gold and crimson of an October sunset. The scene *was* fair.

But Paulina's eyes were quickly withdrawn from it ; they were arrested by an object nearer at hand. At a short distance, planted on a hillock, was a tall wooden crucifix ; devoid of ornament, but touching in its simple truth of realization. A tide of feeling swept across Paulina's breast, memories of a time when for her too, although not of her own faith, the

emblem would have had significance. The angel had stood in the way ; a new antagonist risen up between her and her purpose. Would she, could she do this thing ?

It might have been deliverance ; it was unquestionably meant to be. For a few seconds she faltered ; some prayer, she hardly knew what, some petition to be saved from herself, formed itself within her ; almost forced its way to her lips. But it was cut short.

A reach of the carriage-road to the town was visible below ; along this, at the same moment, drove a barouche and pair ; the occupants unmistakably English. The voices reached them where they stood, and both spectators turned involuntarily ; Charles Rayner at once recognised the party.

“Lady Aspinall and Claude !” he exclaimed ; “how singular !”

“You know them ?” Paulina asked.

“They are our nearest neighbours,” said Charles; “the two properties run together. Claude is the young baronet; he succeeded to the estates last year. I wish you knew Kent.”

The carriage whirled out of sight as he spoke. Still more rapidly in Paulina’s heart, died out the half-formed purpose of good; the images which his words had conjured up left no room for it!

And Charles spoke on now; the opportunity had come, and courage to tell his love came with it. No need to dwell upon this; we care little for Charles Rayner himself. But we do care for the beautiful but false woman who stood beside him, with downcast eyes and still heaving breast, listening to these utterances.

Brief enough, and fervent enough; Charles was in earnest now. Painting the effect on himself of his first meeting with Paulina; the growth of his passion ever

since ; his inability to exist without her. Deploring his own hitherto purposeless life, but entreating her not to reject him on that account. Sketching rapidly what he could offer her ; position, wealth, ample for every enjoyment, although all too little for one so qualified to adorn them. Pledging himself that, should he be accepted, the devotion of his whole future should follow. “ Might he hope ? ”

Paulina again trembled violently. She was deadly pale ; her face blanched to the hue of the marble chapels which gleamed through the shrubberies beside them. But she made no sign of dissent.

Once, and once only, she turned her eyes in the direction of the cross at which she had been looking. Somewhere within her was a superstition, half hope and half fear, that even against her own volition, this great guilt might still be barred against her !

Ah ! but it might not be. Silence was consent ; and Charles Rayner was not slow to interpret it as such. His arm was round her ; his breath hot upon her cheek. “Paulina, darling, say you love me ; say you will be my wife. Say yes.”

And she said it. Very faintly. But still a spoken word :—and, that word.

A great pall of darkness fell upon the scene before her ; something which seemed to have been evoked by the monosyllable, simple as it was ; blotting out from her view lake and island, Alp and sunshine. They were all there, but she could not see them.

Strange, too, that she seemed to be looking upon something else, instead of them. Charles Rayner had led her to a bank near, and seated himself by her ; his arm still pressing her towards him ; showering kisses upon her of which she was hardly conscious. What she did see, did

feel, was widely different. A sea, tossing in white foam. A giddy precipice, at the foot of which the waves broke; herself clinging desperately to the brink. A powerful arm thrown round her;—and, assuredly, *not in love!*

Perception returned at last, and Paulina rose; “she must go back to the hotel.” Charles complied, at last, and led the way; past the crucifix he was going, but she stopped him. “No, no; the way we came up;—any way but that!”

Charles looked surprised, but made no comment, and Paulina soon regained her composure. Not so the Contessa; she was grievously dismayed; found it hard to refrain from informing this new suitor how matters stood. But the maternal instincts prevailed.

“I have not told him,” she said to

Paulina, when they were alone together at bed time; "he would hardly care to know that the wife of his choice had been playing fast and loose with some one else! You must go your own way: I neither hinder you, nor ask your motive. Affection it cannot be; you cannot in these few days have transferred your attachment to a total stranger. If you have yielded to any other temptation, God help you!"

Paulina withdrew sullenly, and the topic was not resumed. Lady Aspinall and her son had taken up their quarters at the Leone d'Oro, and on the following morning Paulina was introduced to them, amidst many felicitations, as Charles Rayner's bride elect. Some further days passed at Orta in the society of the new comers; then the two parties separated, the Contessa and Paulina proceeding, with Charles Rayner, to Milan and Florence, and event-

ually to Rome. Naples was their ultimate destination ; but Paulina had no inclination to reach it before Christmas, when Stephen Luxmoor would return to England.

To the latter, the Contessa had written from Orta, apprising him of what had taken place ; and had received a few lines in reply. Paulina's name was not mentioned ; but Mr. Luxmoor enclosed some notes of hers, and a lock of her hair she had once given him.

So that affair was over, and Paulina at liberty to enjoy herself with her fiancé. And this she unquestionably did. Charles Rayner's purse supplied indulgences of which she had never dreamt. Even Italian life became charming, while in the future was the English home, now daily invested with a brighter halo. In her introduction to the Aspinalls, Paulina had stepped into the position to which her birth entitled her, but from which she had hitherto been

excluded by narrow means. Now the gates were thrown open. Naples, which was reached in January, teemed with intoxication and excitement; Paulina was a success, admired, fêted, had her entourage of followers. And in April the marriage would take place, and the scene of these triumphs be transferred to England; the final debût be made there. Mistress of Stanton Court; wealthy and courted; every circle accessible to her, every wish gratified as soon as formed; who would not envy her?

An alluring prospect no doubt. But it had its back-ground. Even in this world the Nemesis sometimes comes; something behind and beyond that of our own outraged heart and conscience. Other actors appear on the scene; the threads of intrigue are grasped by a firmer hand; the feebler guilt OVERMATCHED by the more robust. Subjugation awaits us, and

terror, and remorse;—the treachery we have wrought, working out, under necessities of our own creation, its career of guilt and retribution!

But enough of this; we must pass to brighter scenes. Our narrative is not tragedy; nor is Paulina, although its characters group themselves round her, our real “heroine;” whatever that far-descended term may mean.

CHAPTER V.

THE winter which Charles Rayner thus passed in Italy was spent by Evelyn with the married aunt already mentioned; her mother's sister.

Mrs. Alsager lived at Chigwell, the picturesque street of which still defies the suburban "builder," and at the time of which we write had not yet cause to dread him. Her husband held a legal appointment, and they had a daughter and four sons. Money was abundant; the domestic rule easy; the "Beeches" a charming villa residence; life there generally enjoyable.

And Nina Alsager and her brothers did their best, in their respective vocations, to enjoy it.

The calling of the youngest scion, No. 4, consisted for the present in school life at Harrow. No. 3, named Clarges, was at Cambridge. No. 2 was Charles. He had emerged from college,—rounding the turning-post of his academical career somewhat narrowly,—and was just called to the bar. The eldest, Richard, nominally did business as a stock-broker. If you called to see him, the clerk would seat you, look into his principal's room, and regret that he had just stepped out: would the visitor wait a few minutes? Should the visitor, after waiting a great many minutes, express impatience, the newspaper was handed to him: "Mr. Alsager would not be long now." And the forenoon might pass thus, and the afternoon too, if you chose. If you did not choose, you went

away. But this was only with business callers. Announce yourself as a personal friend, and you would find that Mr. Alsager had not been in Copthall buildings that day, or probably any day for the last month; and that it was quite uncertain when he would be there!

The fact is, Richard Alsager, and Charles, and Clarges, and even the boy-Alsager, had all a calling in life apart from its every-day business. They were all athletes, and very renowned ones; the side-board groaned under the weight of their trophies; prize-tankards, prize-flagons, prize-salvers; even more than one candelabrum. Richard and Charles were the Castor and Pollux: Richard great at steeple-chases, and Charles,—the gentlest of human beings in his ordinary relations,—truculent and terrible as a pugilist. Clarges jumped; standing jumps and running jumps, hurdles and ditches. And

Ned, the boy-Alsager,—so far as seventeen is boyhood now-a-days,—ran races.

As for Nina, she did nothing athletic, excepting in the gentler field of archery. Nina painted, and played, and sung. Nina could cook, on emergencies, like a real artiste. Nina was excellent in plain needle-work, with a passion for darning which was almost morbid. And Nina was so charming altogether, that we regret there is no vacancy for her, either, as “heroine;” in the present narrative at all events. The family picture was completed by Mrs. Alsager; a cultivated, clever woman; quick-tempered at times, but placable; always of generous sentiments, and a fast friend.

This was the family at the Beeches; and at the Beeches Evelyn Rayner has just arrived to spend two months; her first visit there.

And of Evelyn herself?

Nina and her cousin are both pretty, but in different types; Nina more attractive, Evelyn's a more artistic beauty, tall, fair, delicately-moulded; the face and figure which you involuntarily class as "aristocratic," although, in this case, without even the suspicion of hauteur. At least, with no suspicion of it usually. Now and then, most rarely, there is something in the face which might be mistaken for this. An absolute mistake; the expression, probably derived from some ancestor far away, is as much out of rapport with the other features as with the real nature; for Evelyn is frankness itself. But there, occasionally, the misleading look is. As to other matters, Evelyn's tastes and preferences are interests, not enthusiasms. She would love devotedly; would suffer, should love bring suffering, with sweet patience; but would not be torn fibre from fibre, as some natures are. Not that

Evelyn's is a superficial character ; as far from it as is possible ; but it is the kindly, disciplined English girl's heart, not the dormant crater-fire of a Medea.—We do not mean to imply that Nina Alsager belonged to this latter school, either.

Evelyn reached the Beeches about five in the afternoon, and dinner was at seven. The interval therefore was not long in itself ; and during one hour of it, at least, the visitor was in her own room with Nina, unpacking. And yet, even thus abridged, it produced a striking effect on such male members of the family as she encountered. The Alsager temperament was a susceptible one !

The two youngest sons came first ; Ned Alsager home for the holidays, and Clarges for the Cambridge vacation. Each of whom, within five minutes of shaking

hands with Evelyn, fell insanely and helplessly in love with her; the boy-Alsager the worst of the two. The afternoon being a steady down-pour, with half-thawed snow under foot, Ned Alsager had selected it for running "miles" in an adjacent lane, and came in in a condition horrible to witness. He insisted on an immediate introduction; then, suddenly viewing himself in the light of the new emotions thus inspired, fled upstairs with some ideas of suicide. Clarges followed, and was presented with the same results, slightly modified; and then Mr. Alsager senior made his appearance.

A sufficiently scandalous one. In spite of his years, and in utter defiance of the table of kindred and affinity, he succumbed at once; devoting himself to the visitor with such empressement that he underwent a well-merited rebuke from his wife, and was despatched to his dressing-room.

Lastly, dinner time brought Richard and Charles; the latter half way through the first course, the former not until the third, which waited while he made up lee-way. Their opportunities, as regarded Evelyn, were thus most limited; but they were turned to the best advantage; by the time the ladies left the table, both brothers were as hopelessly in bondage as their predecessors.

But, meanwhile, the hand of fate was on the curtain. How disproportionate are human desires to their ends, even when the latter are attained! And how frequently does it turn out that they are not attainable!

Vainly in those cousinly hearts has the flame of love blazed up, so suddenly and fiercely. They may burn on for ever, but the torch of Hymen will light itself at none of them. It is spell-holden; it cannot ignite except under the wand of the real magician!

And already the magician is at hand. Wholly unconscious of his power, at present; indisposed, it may be, to attach much value to it, even if he should make the discovery. But he will be wiser bye and bye.

“Papa,” said Clarges Alsager, during a pause in the discussion of a recent libel-case between Charles and his father, “do you want the mare to-morrow?”

“No, my boy. Why?”

“I thought that Rayner and I would ride over to Lord Willoughby’s, and see if the large pond bears.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Alsager; “so do. Who is Rayner?”

“Don’t you recollect, Papa? He dined and slept here last summer after our match with the school eleven. Oh! no, you were all at Wimbledon.”

“The Grammar-school, do you mean?”

“Yes,” said Clarges. “He had left some time before, but they could have made no play without him, so we let him join. I called upon him in Cambridge last term, and have seen a good deal of him.”

“And is he coming here to-morrow?”

“He is coming to-night,” said Clarges. “I have asked him to spend a few days. I talked over the matter while she was at dinner, and he can sleep in the old nursery; I only got his answer this evening. He will be here by the last coach.”

“Is he any relation of Evelyn’s?” asked Mr. Alsager.

“Not that I know of,” said Clarges; “Why should he be? Oh! you mean it is the same name: I never thought of that: we have never seen Evelyn before to-day, you know.”

“No,” said Mr. Alsager: “her mother’s death broke off the connection a good deal,

although we have always kept on civil terms. But it is curious this should be a Rayner. What is his father, do you know?"

"I fancy he is a painter, or something of the kind," said Clarges; "they live in Gower-street. I know they are not well off; in fact, that is why I asked Rayner here partly; there's only himself at home, and that's extra slow when you've got to economise."

"I wish some of you would practise that virtue," said Mr. Alsager. "But, Clarges my boy, that must be the same family. What is your friend's Christian name?"

"'M,' something: Matthew, I suppose. No, I know; it's Malcolm."

"Of course," said Mr. Alsager; "I thought so. Why, he's Evelyn's first cousin."

"We are her first cousins," said Clarges, resentfully.

“A girl may have cousins more ways than one, I suppose, Master Solomon? This is on the father’s side. Don’t you know the family history?”

“About as much as I do the Roman emperors,” said Clarges. “What history?”

“Why, your visitor belongs to the disinherited branch. His father, John Rayner, is the eldest son, but he chose to marry against orders, and so took the consequences.”

“You look out, Dick,” said Clarges parenthetically to his elder brother, who was ruminating in gloomy silence on the fair apparition which had just left them. “Go on, Papa.”

“Well, there is not much else. John Rayner was sent adrift, and had to maintain himself as he best might; painting and taking pupils, poor fellow. Your young friend is the only child living now; and,

with their narrow means, perhaps this is just as well."

"What a thundering shame it was," said Clarges. "But, Papa, how could they be disinherited while old Rayner is still living? I thought he must make his will for that."

"No necessity for it," said Mr. Alsager; "a settlement answers all purposes, and he made one. I don't know the details, but substantially everything goes to the second son and his issue."

"And Evelyn's father is the second son?"

"Yes," said Mr. Alsager.

"Then it will all go to Evelyn?"

"Yes," said Mr. Alsager; "unless her father should marry again; I heard some report of his being engaged, a few days since. There is the front door bell; if it is young Rayner, bring him in here."

"Won't it be rather awkward his meeting Evelyn?" said Charles.

“Perhaps so,” said Mr. Alsager; “but I dare say she will be equal to the emergency: one can generally trust a girl’s tact. However, I will tell her of the arrival first: keep him here with you a few minutes after I leave the dining room.”

Malcolm’s entrance here broke off the topic; and a page or two of description, necessary and, we hope, not tedious, must be allotted to him before returning to it.

CHAPTER VI.

IN person Malcolm Rayner was slightly built; the features were small also, and too irregular in themselves, and the hair too low down on the forehead, to be otherwise than plain. But the figure was well-knit, and the eye had a most redeeming sweetness about it; something allied in turns, as the expression varied, to mirth and pathos, and interpreting the mouth, which, in repose, was firmly set, into robustness of will rather than sternness.

Nor did the character belie these indications. Malcolm was blessed with buoyant spirits, strong good sense, and the

generous, manly temper which women admire and men envy. In society he attracted all who came near him; there was a merry gentleness about him, if one may coin the phrase, which was unspeakably winning.

As to personal tastes, Malcolm had two special predilections; cricketing; and horses, so far as the latter had come in his way. He loved the animal, as such: loved to paint it, to sing of it. The painting was not much, for Malcolm had no chance of handling the brush even with John Rayner's success. But for poetry he had gifts; and he sang of the horse, under all aspects, and in all stages, from the colt upwards. All poetry is "mimesis," Aristotle says; and mimesis, as rendered by one of his commentators, is "expression;"—a vent for strong feeling, artificially checked; the breaking loose of the caged waters. If so, Malcolm's muse was per-

haps the creation of the penury which allowed him no stud of his own.

This, perhaps, in its first inception. But latterly, in the closing years of school-life, and, still more, in the solitude of a freshman's first term, another repressed feeling, stronger and deeper twenty-fold, had sent its stream bounding down by the side of the other.

Not love; love of woman, that is. Malcolm, although nearing twenty, was absolutely heart-whole, and seemed likely to remain so. But attachment of another kind; an intense yearning for the home from which he and his had been so ruthlessly excluded. He had never seen the house; with his resentment against Philip Rayner's tyranny nothing would have tempted him within miles of it; nor did the name ever pass the father's lips. But from his mother, Caversham-born and bred, Malcolm had heard of Stanton Court from

boyhood. The gabled Elizabethan pile ; its mullioned windows, its towers and terraces ; the water meadows, with the chalk knolls swelling, spur after spur, above them ; the stately park, colonnades of verdure, the tree-trunks mossed with the growth of centuries, the deer browsing unmolested in their shade ; the church with the hatchments of the old family ; the keep which had been their original home, ivy-mantled and owl-watched ; the unimpaired Rayner estates of which we have spoken, pastures and sheep-downs, arable land and hop land, stretching leagues away out of sight ;—all this the mother never wearied of recounting ; and to it all the son listened, at first with rapturous delight, then, by degrees, with the yearnings of a great love. And when these could neither be assuaged nor gratified, they actuated themselves, as they best might, in numbers.

Of battle-field and tournament the

youthful bard sang ; of the knight's morion and the lady's lute ; of Crusader and lowly pilgrim ; of sea-faring, and siege, and silken bower, and stately pageant. And in every scene, be the truth of history what it might, a Rayner always bore some part. And ever interwoven with it, in some shape or another, was the un beholden home ; that grand old Stanton Court ! Malcolm's poetry was not of first-rate merit ; but it *was* poetry, the utterance by which genuine emotion interprets itself to the world without.

Meanwhile, we are bound to add that this was not the only vent of Malcolm's sentiments. He was a dethroned prince : but there was the correlative fact of an usurping dynasty ; and to this dynasty, as such, he cherished a cordial aversion. Personally he knew nothing of its members. They were only two now, Charles Rayner and Evelyn ; and Malcolm had

never seen either of them. But he genuinely disliked them, notwithstanding; disliked them as persons! His uncle, Charles Rayner, Malcolm depicted under various aspects, none of them at all complimentary; and Evelyn must be something disagreeable also, although he had not quite settled what. For the present he inclined to some type of scornful beauty; haughty, heartless, and so on; although at eighteen there was time enough for the evil to assert itself in fifty ways. But that evil it would and must be, under all conditions and however disguised, he entertained no shadow of a doubt!

Things being as above, Malcolm was certainly not gratified when he heard that his cousin was in the house. Mr. Alsager meant to have imparted the news himself;

but a great wave of cricketing broke over the conversation, and the task fell to Charles, who detained Malcolm in the dining-room as directed, while his father made a similar communication to Evelyn.

“That girl here!” was the exclamation which rose to Malcolm’s lips, and was only kept back by main force: the angry flushing of cheek and brow could not be repressed, and was not lost upon Charles Alsager. Malcolm was so conscious of this, that he pleaded the necessity of dressing, and obtained a few minutes’ grace upstairs, where he digested his wrath as he best might. Then the enemy had to be faced. “I shall make some excuse and cut the thing to-morrow,” he said to himself as he entered the drawing-room.

Evelyn’s reception of the intelligence meanwhile had been very different. “My cousin here; Malcolm Rayner!” And the

ejaculation had certainly no displeasure in it.

The fact is that Evelyn's mind had been a good deal exercised in regard to this cousin. Womanhood had opened out for her new ranges of thought; the objective girl-life was becoming subjective; speculative as to the reasons and fitnesses of things, and its own relations to them. Evelyn dearly loved Stanton Court; and hitherto no complications had existed to disturb this sentiment. But during the last few months, thoughts of the dispossessed father and son had begun to obtrude themselves. She knew the family history; and although as expounded to her, John Rayner had only suffered because he deserved, and only what he deserved, still, there was the fact. Evelyn's father had stepped into his place, and Evelyn herself, hereafter, would occupy that of Malcolm: and Malcolm at all

events, was wholly guiltless. What was he like? What were his pursuits? What profession would he follow? How did he bear his expatriation? Evelyn was curious to know all this. And, with the curiosity, were associated, at times, other feelings; pity for him; compunction, and even shame, as to her own prospective share in the matter.

So when Malcolm at last entered, Evelyn looked up at him with decided interest. She had been imprisoned on a sofa by Richard Alsager, who was descanting on an approaching county ball at Chelmsford. Richard was not affluent of speech by nature, but he was getting on creditably with this topic; gall and wormwood though it was to Ned, who was standing close by, drinking in the discourse with the emotions of a fratricide. But suddenly Evelyn became inattentive. Richard's eulogy of the floor of the Chelmsford

assembly rooms fell on thankless ears; hearing and sight of his companion were both directed to the new comer. And as the new-comer persistently looked the other way, Evelyn had an undisturbed view.

Of its results hereafter; they would naturally take time to develop themselves. But there was one result of which Evelyn became conscious even at the moment;—somehow, for some reason, this was her *own* cousin, par excellence! Had she obeyed impulse, she would have stepped forward at once, and tendered greetings. But she checked herself; they would doubtless be introduced ere long.

No; it was not to be. Mr. Alsager had ruled this in a brief whisper to his wife. “Let them make acquaintance for themselves,” he said; “it may save some em-

barrassment.” So Evelyn’s ear was again bent to Richard Alsager, reinforced soon afterwards by the two next brothers, who edged into her corner in succession, and kept up a lively conversation ; so exasperating Richard, that he retired in dudgeon to the billiard room, slamming the door after him.

The evening passed without Malcolm bestowing any notice, even the most passing, on the object of his antipathy. He purposely avoided doing so ; conversed with Mrs. Alsager, and then secured Nina at the piano, where she played and sang like a Siren. At last, it was bed-time. Clarges, as in duty bound, tore himself out of the charmed circle, and stood for a few minutes by the fire, talking to his guest. Then Malcolm prepared to leave the room ; shook hands all round, and, with a glance, which shewed him a light figure in evening costume, but little more, made a formal

bow to Evelyn. But this was too much for the frank nature ; impulse won the day.

“ I think we ought to shake hands too,” she said, stepping forward, “ although it is our first acquaintance. I am so very glad we have met.”

Malcolm could neither refuse the proffered hand, nor forbear looking up at its owner :—at last !

“ What a sweet face !” was the mental ejaculation which followed, in spite of himself. Why, it was the face, and form, too, which, in idea, had inspired his verse, times out of number ; so fair ; so refined ; so . . .

Ah ! but *there* was the footprint of the defacer. “ So aristocratic,” was the next term which suggested itself. As we have said, it was Evelyn’s most marked trait ; her special attraction, to ordinary beholders. But on Malcolm’s eye, it struck

very differently. Aristocratic! yes, just so! Just what he had expected, and was prepared to resent!

Yes; the second impression was right; the apparent sweetness superficial only; the frank greeting, a "condescension" which he would just as soon have dispensed with! —All the work of a moment. But the result was that Malcolm's reply was courteous merely, instead of being cordial, as it was preparing to be. Then the various cousinhoods dispersed themselves, and he went to bed with renewed purposes of departing next day.

But, he did not depart, either that day, or for several after it.

First, Lord Willoughby's pond came as an adversary. There was no escaping the ride over there with Clarges; and although

the ice did not then actually "bear," it pledged itself, as distinctly as ice could, to do so in the course of the night, and a skating party was organized accordingly. Then, on the return drive from this, Mrs. Alsager stopped the breach, insisting that he should on no account leave before the county ball next week. She had taken cordially to their visitor; and when the hostess insisted, and Nina seconded the order, there was no saying nay. Malcolm was not susceptible, like the Alsagers themselves; but he saw the merit of a pretty face, his cousin Evelyn's always excepted; and Nina, with her bright eyes and seductive smile, was far too charming to be refused anything. So his movements for the present were taken out of his own volition.

However, the situation proved supportable. Malcolm and his scornful beauty, although inhabiting the same house, were

seldom in actual contact. At breakfast, whether of express arrangement or otherwise, their seats were at opposite corners on the same side; Evelyn was barely visible. Then, from breakfast to dusk, life went on out of doors; skating, riding, shooting and the like. Lastly, at dinner and after dinner, the two scions of the Rayner stock were mutually led into captivity, Evelyn by the male Alsagers, and Malcolm by the female. So that, beyond the interchange of good morning and good evening, and some passing civilities at other times, "that girl," as Malcolm had been pleased to call her, was practically no drawback to his enjoyment at all.

The only annoyance which did result arose from a wholly different cause; one for which Evelyn was in no sort responsible; while Malcolm himself was wholly, and most unreasonably so.

Most unreasonable, it really was; but

there was the fact ;—he was always thinking about this cousin of his ! Go where he would, and do what he would, there was his brain at work on this one subject. Why should it be ?

Malcolm tried to discover the cause sometimes, but with little success. His speculations were nipped in the bud. Had he met Evelyn, any hour of the day, he knew that he would have avoided her ; he had done so, more than once. Her society, even her presence in the room, were distasteful to him. On the rare occasions when his eye wandered in the direction of the fair face, his original impression was confirmed ; there was the hauteur, the latent scorn in it. Why then did he think so much about her ?

Not, perhaps, an easy question to answer ; but Malcolm lost even the chance of answering it. At some point like the above, Evelyn and himself would change places

in the analysis. *Was* it scorn? he would go on to reflect. Well, not perhaps towards any one in her own position;—“some donkey with lots of money;”—to such an one, she would be amiable enough. But let a man approach her without these advantages? The neck would arch, the lip curl; eye and brow denounce the presumptuous intruder!

She would be rude to him?

No, no; she was too much the lady for that; too . . . too . . . well, too gentle, or generous, or whatever it might be; no saying what. For when Malcolm's reflections had reached this point, there would be a new divergence; memories of the frank kindness with which Evelyn had extended her hand to him on their first meeting; something which smote to his heart with a kind of pang. No; even to this haughty cousin he would not be unjust. She would not be rude to any human

being; could not be; the rejection would be absolute, unmistakable, but she herself would be all goodness, all truth. And so he would revolve the matter backwards and forwards.

A harmless employment enough, in itself. As an abstract question he might as well discuss this as any other; hydrostatics; entomology; the rings of Saturn; anything. No doubt. But what was remarkable was the assiduity of the occupation. Had he actually "cared for" Evelyn, as the phrase goes, he could hardly have thought more about her!

Singular, too, that his speculations always broke off at the same point; always brought him back to that first greeting with Evelyn; the half minute during which the freely-proffered, soft palm had rested in his own. Why should he think of this? he was neither chiropodist nor fortune-teller. But, somehow, the palm

haunted him; thought and volition succumbed to it like a mesmerism !

So things went on for some days, bringing the time to the afternoon before the Chelmsford ball. Then, Malcolm received new food for his meditations.

CHAPTER VII.

THERE was a temporary lull that afternoon in Evelyn's absorption by the male Alsagers. Ned, indeed, had finally withdrawn from the scene. He was due at Harrow, and had been despatched there in a frame of mind vindictive and blood-thirsty in the last degree, alternating with bursts of grief which might have melted granite. But, on this day, the others were out of the way also. Richard, on a hunting appointment of old standing in Berkshire, watching the frost, which showed symptoms of breaking up. And Charles, with his first brief at Westminster; a guinea "motion," which ultimately involved at-

tendance there for half the term, and the loss of a new umbrella. Clarges, on the other hand, was, or meant to be, at home:—the most devoted worshipper, next to the afflicted Ned, he had counted on this afternoon alone with his idol. But the fates ruled otherwise.

“Clarges,” said Mrs. Alsager after luncheon.

“Yes, mother.”

“I want you to drive me over to Fyfield, please.”

“To Fyfield, mater? What for?”

“Why, I *must* call on the Everests. I have put it off too long already, and after this business to-morrow night I shall be fit for nothing. You have no engagement?”

“No; nothing particular, that is,” said Clarges, ruefully. “But hadn’t Blumer better take you in the close carriage?”

“You are very polite, Clarges, but the carriage would be knocked to pieces on

those cross roads. Besides, we shall want it to Chelmsford, and a second day would be too much for the horses."

"I shall be proud to volunteer," said Malcolm.

"No, no, Clarges must come; he is the proper person. You stay at home and amuse the young ladies."

At three o'clock, accordingly, Clarges started with his mother, and Malcolm remained in charge as directed. He proposed a walk; but for the next twenty-four hours, or the available portion of them, Nina's energies were absorbed by "costume." The pretty ankles would have their turn later on, but the fingers must work at present.

And work they did, deftly and devotedly; as long as they were permitted. But then came an interruption. The garment in

progress was not too recondite for the drawing-room, and Nina had brought it there. Malcolm sate chatting with her for some time; then Evelyn joined them, and things were going pleasantly enough, when a fresh visitor appeared. His ring was unheard; otherwise Nina would have guarded the approaches, or taken to flight herself.

“Mr. Brocklebank.”

A heavy young man of five and twenty, or thereabouts; florid and stolid. Nina had to discourse on platitudes, her needle rusting in idleness, and her soul hungering for him to leave, for upwards of an hour. Hints and yawns alike ineffectual; Mr. Brocklebank always, apparently, on the point of rising, and always finding himself unequal to the effort.

“Oh! that that too, too solid flesh would melt,
Or else resolve itself to bid adieu,”

Nina whispered to Evelyn, during a breath-

ing time allowed by Malcolm's gallantly drawing the enemy on himself. But the flesh sate on obdurately; and was only dislodged at last by the appearance of the postman, and the reflections as to the time of day with which Nina improved the occasion.

"Oh! dear," exclaimed poor Nina as the door closed, "I am so behind-hand! actually it's half-past four. What a dreadful, dreadful man! Evelyn, my dear, would you mind my leaving you till dinner-time? I *must* try and finish this upstairs with Jarvis. You and Mr. Rayner can get on somehow, can't you?"

"I suppose we can," thought Malcolm; "but it is exceedingly awkward." However, there was no help for it. Nina vanished in the moment of utterance, and the ordeal had to be faced.

It ought not to have been a very terrible one. There was a bright fire; the room

was snugness itself: the light pleasantly hovering on the confines of dusk; and an exceedingly pretty girl to share the situation with him. But Malcolm did not half like it for all that. He could not have been more embarrassed if he had been in love with his companion, instead of nourishing a well-founded aversion for her!

Evelyn, on her part, felt unaffectedly pleased with their rencontre. For such it practically was; they had been nearly a week under the same roof, but had not "met" in any sense of the word. Pretty often, while apparently engrossed by the Alsagers, Evelyn had stolen glances at this other cousin. But that was not like exchanging words and thoughts; and the fewer chances he had given her the more she had longed for this. She wondered so much what he was like!

Externally, she knew well enough; even stolen glances had made her at home with

face and figure. But she wanted the real Malcolm Rayner himself; the esoteric idea, undisclosed by the every-day nothings of table-talk. And now here was the opportunity.

"The afternoons are really growing lighter," she observed, feeling a very unwonted shyness at speaking first, but impelled to do so.

"Yes," said Malcolm. "They turn, you know, early in December, while the mornings go on darker and darker, up to January. Are you an early riser, Miss Rayner?"

"Pretty well," said Evelyn. She had it on her tongue to add, "Mister Rayner," with an echo of his own formal tone; but discretion forbade.

"The upper ten thousand can dispense with it," said Malcolm bitterly. As he could not escape the conference, he was determined that this proud girl should not

trample upon him in it:—the daughter of the usurping house too! “It is the poor bread-winner who must be up with the lark,” he continued, “delving and spinning, with hands or brain, before Belgravia has settled into its first sleep.”

Evelyn ventured a timid glance at the speaker, and wondered if he were a radical. How very dreadful! She was not quite clear as to what a radical was, but she had heard of Cambridge as a place of levelling tendencies; and this suggested her next topic.

“You are not at Clarges’ college, I think, are you?”

“No, Miss Rayner; my father could only afford one of the inferior ones—Gervoise’s. My being at Cambridge at all is a serious expense to him; he works hard for every penny, and it comes to little enough at the year’s end. But I am as proud of him as if he were a duke; I have

reason to be. However, I did not mean to intrude upon you with our family troubles."

"The family is my own," said Evelyn, gently. Malcolm looked up, and saw once more the sweet face of his first impression. If only there were not those other qualities in the back-ground!

"It is singular we should have met here first, and by mere accident," she went on: "I have so often wished for it. Do you like Cambridge?"

"Greatly, in itself," said Malcolm, whose poet-soul, even in the November term, had found new pabulum in that seat of learning. "It is so unlike anything one has ever seen; so different from a selfish, commercial place like London. It is just like the most perfect picture, only real at the same time; gardens, and splendid trees, and meadows, and the river winding in and out of them, with the arch of a bridge

here, or a gateway there; that is the dream-land. Then you turn a corner, and find yourself in the heart of one of the colleges, as if it had sprung up by magic; life and movement all round you. Not that the colleges are not dreamy, too. There is Jesus, as beautiful as if it had stepped out of a piece of tapestry; and the old bit of John's, overhanging the Cam. I could stand and look at that by the hour together."

"He can't be a radical," thought Evelyn; "that is quite impossible!" "What is it you dislike then?" she asked, as her companion paused in his burst of enthusiasm. "'In itself,' you said."

"Yes, only in itself, Miss Rayner," said Malcolm, with a relapse into sternness, almost churlishness. Time, indeed, that he should draw in! Why here had he been unlocking the treasure-chambers of thought, not only to a stranger, but to

one incapable of a sentiment external to herself and her "own set!" He changed his tone at once.

"I detest the sort of men up there, to begin with," he said; "a good many of them, that is; the plutocracy and aristocracy of the place: insolent, vulgar puppies that they are! Of course one is beneath their notice, one knows that well enough: at all events, I am. For the first six months that I resided, I was simply a beast."

"Were you?" said Evelyn, compassionately, although with some wonder in her tone.

"I beg your pardon, I mean that I belonged to no college; that is called being a beast at Cambridge; and now I am only a Gervoise's man. I don't expect to know them, or them to know me, of course. But that is quite different to having their eye-glasses up at you, or being elbowed

off the pavement, if you ever happen to meet the lot; just as if you belonged to a different species."

"I am afraid he is rather proud," was Evelyn's second note of character. "But no doubt it must be galling to him. I don't fancy I should mind it myself, but then men are so different."

"Again I am very rude, Miss Rayner," Malcolm continued; "your sympathies, of course, are with those I have been speaking of."

"No, indeed they are not. If there is one thing which seems to me more noble than another, it is the struggling against . . . against not being well off, and things of that kind; and succeeding. But I fancy that at a place like Cambridge, I should not care for the puppies, if there are such:—I thought they abounded more at Oxford. I should be seeing the beauty, as you describe it, the grand old colleges and

courts and gardens, and not see anything that was disagreeable, at all. I am sure that, at home, all the foolish people in the world couldn't spoil my enjoyment. It would still be the same Stanton Court as ever, the rides the same, the walks the same, the dear old house to love and be happy in, even if"

Evelyn stopped most abruptly, colouring deeply; her feeling was that of intense pain. How had she lanced the wound, already, as she could see, quick and bleeding! And what could she say in alleviation?

Say nothing, was the obvious course; but her compassion was too strong for this.

"I do so beg your pardon," she murmured; "indeed I did not mean it."

Malcolm was softened in spite of himself; he could not help replying more gently.

"It does not trouble me," he said,

“please do not mind; you see I do not know the place at all: it would be different if I had been brought up there. Please think no more about it. You are fond of riding, then?”

“Oh! yes, very fond. I enjoy it more than anything.”

“You hunt?”

“Not now. I rode out with the hounds when I was smaller, but I should not care to now; two or three times, when I have seen girls doing it, it has struck me as unfeminine. However, I ought not to say that, for I have a most unfeminine taste myself.”

“What is that?”

“I shall shock you dreadfully; I have hardly ever ventured to confess it before. But I do dearly like being with the horses.”

“Really!” said Malcolm, laughing. Actually laughing; he detected himself in the fact, and made some feint of becoming re-

served and distant again ; but the infection of the frank face before him was too strong for this. Such a contrast, too, as its delicate lines offered to the predilection Evelyn had just avowed !

“ I seldom get the chance,” she continued ; “ it is only when the men are out of the stables that I can venture there, and then I am in fear of detection all the time. But I enjoy it beyond everything ; I suppose it is the family taste re-appearing in me. I think horses are such grand creatures !”

“ Exactly what I feel,” said Malcolm.

“ I am glad I have not frightened you. Of course I do not understand their points, as gentlemen do ; only I like watching them, and making friends with them : I am sure they respond to it.”

“ All animals do,” said Malcolm.

“ Yes,” Evelyn continued : “ even that fierce hunter of grandpapa’s is quite gentle

with me; he eats bread out of my hand, and lets me stroke him by the half-hour together. And yet with grandpapa, the day he bought him, he galloped round and round a field for fifty minutes without stopping, and then, when he was turned into the road again, ran away the whole twelve miles home."

"I seldom get even a canter," said Malcolm, sadly. "But I love horses as you do."

"And write poetry about them?"

"Oh! did you hear me repeating those lines to Clarges the other day? They were a very humble effusion; mere burlesque in fact. Merriman had told Clarges of them."

"Who is Merriman?"

"An old schoolfellow of mine," said Malcolm; "he is up at Cambridge, at least he was last term; but I don't suppose I shall ever see him again. He has turned Cheimôno-baptist."

“ I never heard of that sect.”

“ It is not a sect,” said Malcolm, “ only a sort of club; they bathe all through the winter, which the word means.”

“ But the verses were not about that ?”

“ No, they were about a young lady to whom he is engaged. I had been laughing at him, and saying that he cared much less for her than for a bay pony he has; and then I sent him the lines.”

“ The lady was Wilhelmine, was she not ?” asked Evelyn. “ I only caught a word here and there.”

“ Oh ! no, that is the pony’s name; her’s is Jessie. I will say the lines to you if I may; there are only three stanzas Merri-man lives in Wales, I should premise.”

So Malcolm recited accordingly :

“ When the pearly dew’s bathing the sweet meadow
grasses,

And dim through the mists the blue mountains
are seen ;

I think on my Jessie, the sweetest of lasses,
And saddle my pony, my bay Wilhelmine.

“Returning at eve, when the sun’s setting glories
Beam far o’er the mountains, an ocean of gold,
With a red-purple cloud-isle, fit dwelling for Houris,
As Mahomet taught his bold Moslems of old ;

“Vain, Jessie, I think, were such beautiful Eden,
With no laughing eyes to illumine the scene ;
And joyless, oh ! joyless, both prospect and maiden,
Did a Cambridge hack bear me, not bay Wilhelmine.

“They are much too pretty for burlesque,” said Evelyn.

“Do you really think so ?” asked Malcolm, much gratified ; for his pieces seldom found an appreciative listener. “I was trying to make out a tune for them before lunch, but I could not get it right : I only just know the notes.”

“Shall I try ?”

“Would you really ?” said Malcolm : “I should be so awfully obliged. But it will bore you, will it not ?”

“Oh ! no.”

So Nina’s piano-candles were lighted, and Evelyn betook herself to her task,

Malcolm producing a sheet of music-paper, on which he had blurred some hieroglyphics that morning. The first two lines were mastered without special difficulty; but the third was an enigma worthy of Œdipus. Evelyn tried it over in various shapes, half-a-dozen times or more, but with the most unprosperous results.

“ Might I just play it to you ? ” said Malcolm. “ I will pick it out in the bass. ”

So Evelyn’s fair hands were lifted from the instrument; and Malcolm, forgetting for the moment all prejudices and prepossessions, knelt down beside her, and, after various false starts, succeeded in realizing his conceptions. Then the fourth line was adjusted, and Evelyn had to sing over the whole to an extemporised accompaniment, Malcolm standing behind her and supplying the words as required. But she seemed to need little prompting.

“ The last two lines are rather ungal-

lant," she said, when the performance had undergone a second rehearsal.

"Oh! but please remember they were only chaff; in fact, I think of altering them. I have never been in love, but I do believe in it with all my heart and soul. I mean, I think it is the grandest thing in the world; there would be no history, no poetry without it; no anything worth living for. Perhaps, as we were reading in that Plato-lecture the other day, one ought not to have jested on the subject; it is too sacred. However, Merriman did not seem to mind much."

"Have you been introduced to the young lady?"

"No," said Malcolm. "But he has told me all about her: she has hazel eyes, and is a brunette, and sings a splendid contralto; oh! and I forgot her ears; they are the smallest and prettiest in the world. How curious that is!"

“What? That she should have small ears?”

“No, but that a man who is in love should be able to talk about them; people are so different. I believe that was what made me compare her with the pony, Merriman telling me all her ‘points,’ as you said just now. If I loved, I don’t think I should know whether a girl had blue eyes or brown ones.”

“Perhaps you are colour-blind,” said Evelyn. “Some people, you know, cannot distinguish colours the least; they will call a red thing green, and so on.”

“Ah! you are laughing at me. But I really meant that.”

“Meant that you would not know what colour a young lady’s eyes were?”

“Yes.”

“But you would look at them sometimes?”

“I dare say I should do that,” said

Malcolm, whose own look was at the moment intently fixed upon his companion's bright orbs, although with absolute unconsciousness of the fact. "But I should not see the eye itself; only the truth and beauty in it."

"There might be neither."

"There must be by the hypothesis," said Malcolm. "I beg your pardon for talking Euclid; I meant, that I should never be in love with a mere face. Loving is worshipping, you know; the Prayer-book says so; and one couldn't worship a face; it would be idolatrous."

"You seem to have given the subject some consideration," Evelyn observed, in a tone in which possibly some shade of pique mingled.

"No, indeed not, in any practical sense, nor am I likely to do so; I have no money myself, and I shall certainly not turn fortune-hunter. That is just the one thing

in the world that I detest; with all my heart and soul."

"What a favourite phrase that is of his," thought Evelyn:—reflection No. 3;—"and how strongly, almost fiercely, he feels some things! It is curious, with such a sweet temper as I am sure he has. I suppose it all comes from that old trouble. How I wish, wish, wish . . ."

Evelyn had not time to develop what she wished then, for some reply was necessary. She diverted the conversation however from its recent subject; a feeling for which she would have found it difficult to find a name, compelled her to do so.

Then they talked on, easily and confidentially, as if they had known each other for years. Outside topics merely. Malcolm's profession, which it appeared was still a moot point, although with leanings to the bar. The Cambridge terms he would have to keep. The

Alsagers ; Nina especially. Painting ; music ; books. All exoteric in themselves, but here and there "shot" with some vein of colouring from the inner life of both speakers ; something which gave each personal interest in the other. Evelyn carefully avoided all reference to family matters ; and the talk rippled on so pleasantly that Malcolm had not time even to ask for a "real" song, as he had intended to do. Just as he was framing the request, wheels were heard outside, and Evelyn looked up at the clock in amazement.

"Actually past six !" she exclaimed, "That must be aunt and Clarges."

It was not Mrs. Alsager but her husband ; whom, however, she soon followed ; then came dinner and the evening as usual. The only unwonted circumstance was that Malcolm, for the first time, observed how Charles and Clarges, the

only two Alsagers now at home, monopolized their cousin! Perhaps he had more leisure for observation than usual. Mrs. Alsager was somnolent after her drive, while Nina had again fled upstairs for millinery. At all events, the fact did force itself upon him, and with a wholly new sensation. He felt quite indignant.

Should he join the trio? No, he did not care to do that. He did, in fact, nothing; sate by himself, turning over photographs, and pasturing keen resentment against somebody, he was not quite sure whom. Then, at bed-time, Evelyn's cordial "good night" restored him; and he lay awake for an hour or two, recalling the incidents of the afternoon.

Not of any set purpose, this; the recollections forced themselves upon him. Singular enough, when he came to think of it, how the afternoon *had* been spent; how intimately, during its course, his own

entity had been identifying itself with that of the last person he would have selected to share it. However, there was the fact. And eventually Malcolm left off trying to account for it, and went to sleep in its simple acceptance.

Little did he foresee in what divergence of the two natures thus brought together, the next evening's occurrences were to issue!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE county ball at Chelmsford was highly "select;" the ball of the year, par excellence, and only accessible to families of some pretension. Malcolm had gathered this, with small satisfaction, during the preceding week; and he realised it still more in the room itself.

Well filled, and pleasant looking enough; —in itself; but its social aspect just that in which Malcolm personally had no share. As of right it was his, no doubt; but as of fact, with the Gower-street house and the drawing lessons, he had no locus standi there. Palpably, but for his having accompanied the Alsagers, he would not

have been allowed in the room at all! Being there, he resolved to enjoy himself; but the matter rankled, all the same.

We are by no means upholding Malcolm Rayner in this; quite the contrary; this antagonism to slight, real or anticipated, was his weak point. It is a mistake to depict character as if its essential traits were the only ones; very often they are not even the most prominent. Malcolm's was an affectionate, kindly nature; but this drop from the bitter well had been infused into it, and, to a superficial observer, might at times have seemed to compose the whole. This evening, chance willed that it should come into full play.

"I shall permit nothing of the kind, my dear," said Nina Alsager to Evelyn, who had just received her card, and was proceeding to fill it up with engagements

for "round" and "square" dances, as fast as Charles and Clarges could alternate them. "Mamma has put you into my charge this evening, and I intend you to behave accordingly. As to your being monopolized by these boys, it is out of the question."

"But I would much sooner dance with my cousins than any one else," said Evelyn; although secretly rejoicing that Nina's interference would leave room for that other, and nearer, cousin, should he think fit to offer himself. At present, Malcolm had got separated from their party, and was in the act of being captured by one of the stewards. And the captor's eye, and hand, had an ominous direction towards the Misses Golightly, who had been the scourge of the ball for fifteen years past.

"One round dance with each," said Nina, replying to Evelyn's plea for her

cousins; "but that is peremptorily all. I had a suspicion you would be the belle here to-night, and so you are; that is obvious to the meanest capacity. So please be select in your choice of partners."

Nina was quite right: a face and manner at once so distingué and so "fresh" as Evelyn's attracted all eyes.

"Introduce me there, please," said Algernon Strachan to the steward who had taken Malcolm in charge, and who now, having consigned him to one of the sisters, was returning to his post with the self-approbation of a good conscience.

"Introduce you where?" said the person addressed: "to the Golightlys? Surely you know them?"

"A man must have greatly misused his gifts not to do so," said Strachan. "No, I mean that girl talking to Miss Alsager."

So the introduction came off. If Evelyn was the belle of the ball, Algernon Strachan

was its speciality in the opposite sex; heir to the richest baronetcy in the county, fifth wrangler in his year, and stroke of the Cambridge boat. More than one fair cheek would receive an added tinge should Algernon manifest any interest in it! All which information Nina duly imparted in a whisper, as he came up to their party.

Algernon Strachan secured Evelyn for a quadrille, which was just coming off. Then Charles and Clarges had their waltz apiece. Then Evelyn was claimed by her new acquaintance for a mazurka; and, when it was over, was glad to sit out the next dance, Algernon standing by her, conversing. She liked him, and they found topics in abundance.

One in particular, in which Evelyn discovered that she had developed a special interest since yesterday; that of Cambridge and Cambridge life. Her present companion's point of view was of course

very different from Malcolm's; but the two pieced together well enough, Malcolm's forming the text, and Algernon's supplying a commentary, or exegesis, which completed it in various points left imperfect the afternoon before.

Thus it happened, that, amongst other colleges, they came to speak of "Gervoise's." Evelyn had a great desire to know more about it, and, chance favouring her, contrived to introduce the name.

"Gervoise's? 'Jarvie's,' we call it," said her companion with a half-smile, pleasant enough, but unquestionably significant.

"It is not much thought of, then?"

"Well no," said Algernon; "a caddish sort of place; quite fourth-rate. But perhaps," he added, apologetically, "you know some one there?"

"Oh! no," was Evelyn's hasty answer; "no one of the slightest consequence, that

is." And something very like a blush shewed itself in the speaker's face.

The truth was, that during the last twenty-four hours, Evelyn's mind had been much exercised in regard to her cousin Malcolm. Was she not caring a good deal for him; at all events, thinking a good deal about him? The question was not put so categorically as this; maidenhood would have taken umbrage; it did remonstrate, as it was. "Quite clear that he cared nothing for herself:—was it not unseemly even to admit the possibility on her part?" But this could not be helped; the question *would* present itself. And, worse still, in the depths of Evelyn's own consciousness there was something in league with the intruder; a Tarpeia in the citadel. Idle to assure herself, as she did a hundred times in the twenty-four hours, that it was "all nonsense." The traitress within unbarred the gates, and the mailed foe

marched to its conquest. With the words of denial trembling on her lips, Evelyn was compelled to own to herself that she "did care;" and that she had no intention of doing otherwise!

Hence, on the present occasion, the hurried answer and the blush. The confession to herself of the heart's secret; and the equally instinctive dread lest word or act should reveal it elsewhere!

All which might have been very well, but for one unfortunate circumstance. Unperceived by either of the two speakers, at all events by Evelyn, Malcolm Rayner was all the time within ear-shot of them!

Sarah Golightly had fastened upon him like an octopus. A waltz. A quadrille. Then refreshments. Then a third dance, with others looming in the distance. Malcolm writhed in her custody, helpless and hopeless. His name seemed to write itself on her card, his movements to obey

hers, without choice or volition of his own!

At length, fortune seemed propitious; a vacant chair offered, and Miss Golightly was induced to deposit herself upon it. He would be quit of this dreadful female now.

But no; the octopus was on the alert. It wore, on some section of itself, a plaid scarf or some such garment. This dropped to the ground; and when Malcolm politely restored it, he found himself, without the least knowing how, deep in the Macgildownie branch of the Macduffers. The tartan, it appeared, belonged to them; they were near connections of the Golightlys; the sisters all doted on their "clan," and never thought of dressing without its colours;—did not Malcolm think them beautiful?

Malcolm, groaning inwardly, was about to express such admiration as he could of

a dingy yellow bisected by scarlet, when a familiar voice struck his ear. Evelyn was close beside him; and the concluding sentences of her conversation with Algernon Strachan reached him verbatim!

Ejaculating something, he hardly knew what, to Miss Golightly, Malcolm escaped to the further end of the room. His blood boiled. He had been chafed by his reflections on entering the room; chafed by his partner; and now, this came to complete matters! The insult to his college; Evelyn's contemptuous mention of himself. Her fear of being supposed even to know any one at "Jarvie's," at all intimately! Idiot that he had been!

Yes, twice-told idiot. For, during the last twenty-four hours, some germs of consciousness, born from the preceding afternoon, had developed themselves in Malcolm's mind also. Had any afternoon ever passed with him so enjoyably before?

Of course he was not in love with Evelyn Rayner, and did not intend to be; in their relative positions there would be degradation in the mere thought. But, had things been otherwise, it might have been . . . well, very pleasant. And pleasant he had resolved it should be, for these few further days they would be together. Pleasant this evening. He would see her off and on; claim at least one dance from her; he had been on the point of doing so when Miss Golightly's scarf dropped! But now!—Detestable girl!

“Yes, detestable!” Malcolm repeated to himself. “I see the whole now. Yesterday afternoon, I was well enough; there was no one else to amuse herself with, and she put up with me; condescended! Quite a different thing here, with her own set round her.”

On such slight matters hinges human destiny! But for the Macgildownie scarf,

Malcolm would not have overheard what he did. And, but for his over-hearing—supplemented, as it was, by a further incident, presently to be narrated but equally trivial in itself,—well, this history need not have been written.

Over and over again, in the corner to which he had retreated, Malcolm recalled the words of which he had been the involuntary auditor; all the more cutting on that account. He was roused from this occupation by a voice at his elbow.

“You seem to find the room hot?” said the speaker.

Malcolm turned upon him—it was a male voice—almost savagely. The tones betrayed some amusement, and, in Malcolm’s present mood they sounded like an echo of the disparaging phrases on which he was brooding.

“No, not particularly,” he replied, brusquely enough.

“You would not contravene any article in the Decalogue, if you did,” said his new companion, Malcolm’s senior by a few years; “I am suffocated. However, pray let me withdraw the imputation as it displeases you.”

Malcolm laughed. “All right,” he said; “I was out of temper about something.”

“Your late partner, perhaps? Sarah Golightly is certainly trying. I have been admiring your devotion to her.”

“I could not get away,” said Malcolm. “By the way, who is that man standing dos-a-dos to her?”

“Tall, and reasonably good looking?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Malcolm; “he danced the mazurka, and he is talking to his partner now. A young lady with a single rose in her hair.”

“That is young Strachan,” said his companion; “our leading family here. I live at Chelmsford,” he added in expla-

nation; "as far, that is, as a barrister now-a-days can be said to live at all."

"You are at the bar, then?"

"I have that honour," was the reply, "and an extremely barren one it is. Mr. Eldon Bligh attends chambers every day with the utmost regularity; and the laundress comes there, and occasionally a dun or two. But nobody else ever comes. The irony of my Christian name is tantalizing."

"I am thinking of the bar," said Malcolm.

"You cannot do better. Think of it as often as you feel disposed. But don't go to it."

"I know it is uphill work," said Malcolm; "but some barristers get on. And it is a grand profession."

"A costermonger's is a long way grander," said Eldon: "it does benefit his species; but I cannot see that ours does; we only exist to make money, and

we extract as much of it as we can out of the most sordid of human qualities. That is what makes bar reputations so ephemeral. Who knows anything about Follett now?"

"But your work is not confined to property?"

"No, there is the Old Bailey, certainly. However, you are right; crime *is* grand. Given the suspicion of foul play, and some old woman's stomach who never had enough to fill it since she was born, becomes the table-talk of half England. A three volume novel is nothing to it."

"I don't care much for novels," said Malcolm.

"Don't you? Well, I do; I am profoundly grateful to them if they are worth reading."

"If! that is the whole point. What does make a novel worth reading?"

"Rather a hard question, I admit," said

Eldon. "What makes it 'succeed' now-a-days is more readily told; there must be a breach of the seventh commandment in it."

"That seems easy enough," said Malcolm.

"I don't know, not always. The two last I read rather bungled the matter, and failed accordingly; the public had not got what it wanted."

"What were their names?"

"I have utterly forgotten; one, I recollect, had four people who were mutually desirous of committing—co-correspondency, shall we call it? The circumstances however were not propitious, and it evaporated in merely pious sentiments."

"And the other?"

"The other," said Eldon, "did not fail on this account. There was an undoubted co-correspondency; an exquisite young creature, married about a twelvemonth, ran off

with a man with false teeth. But then, things were too strong for digestion. The husband obtained a divorce, and the exquisite creature married the pseud-odont; he ill-treated her, and she, having the entire command of her own property, ran away again,—alone, this time,—and cut him off with a shilling; whereupon, to retaliate, he informed her that they had not been really married, the legal forms being defective.”

“Dear me!” exclaimed Malcolm,

“That is not half of it,” said his companion. “Hearing this, the first husband came over to America, where it had all happened, and brought the faithless fair home, renewing his vows of attachment in the state-cabin. Then false teeth retracts, and asserts that he really was married, and is coming to claim his wife. He however founders at sea; and she contracts a pulmonary complaint and deceases in the arms

of her first husband, recommending him to marry her cousin, with whom it transpires he had really been in love throughout. So it all comes right, and the survivors are happy ever afterwards."

"What a remarkable story!" said Malcolm. "But I wonder you care to read such trash."

"There are exceptions; and a clever book does take one out of oneself. But probably you have not found that a necessary process yet."

"I don't know that I have," said Malcolm. "When I am tired I generally go to sleep."

"I used to once," said Eldon, "but it seems harder now. Past things have a trick of grafting themselves into the present." A look of pain, or some other deep feeling, much at variance with his habitual cynicism, crossed the speaker's face, and he changed the topic.

“No wonder we are hot,” he said; “look at that prodigious fire at the end of the room: and the evening has fallen quite mild; spring-like. You can always tell when a thaw has set in, by their lighting a furnace for you. It is a barbarous thing, this combustion of coal at all.”

“What would you have then?”

“Well, some less cumbrous agent. Electricity may help us some day; we may arrest its heat, as we have done its motive power; utilise it to cook and warm. A mean task for it, but these Afrites must be tamed; put to toil like Samson in the mill. Probably however you consider him an entire myth?”

“Oh! no.”

“A young lady asked me the other day,” said Eldon, “whether I ‘really believed all that about Adam and Eve?’ I told her that, as far as Eve was concerned, I certainly did; it was the only way of

accounting for such beautiful creatures as women being so depraved."

"Did she seem flattered?"

"Well, we had not much conversation afterwards," said Eldon.

"But," asked his companion, "do you really think women so depraved?"

"Perhaps not as the rule; I only said that to annoy her. But they are very weak." The look of pain again crossed the speaker's face; but he went on. "That is what makes the advocacy of 'women's rights' so unpractical; let them be generals and cabinet ministers to-morrow, and within three months it would all come round again; they would not have force to hold their own. As an anatomical fact, they have less brain than we have."

"You judge them cynically," said Malcolm, who, however, in his present mood, was little disposed to quarrel with the sentiment.

“Well, no. Their destiny is settled here, and no talking will alter it; but hereafter things may be reversed; it may turn out that man is the crude idea, and woman the completed type, the final cause of our having existed at all. But they are feeble creatures, needing moral help from us as they do physical. And maledictions on him who withholds either.”

The last words were uttered almost fiercely, and Malcolm looked at the speaker with some surprise; but he again changed the subject.

“Are you staying with the Alsagers?” he asked. “I saw you came with their party.”

“Yes. Do you know them?”

“Only slightly; they live too far off; but I like them all. By the way, who is that young lady you spoke of just now, the one with the rose in her hair? She came with the Alsagers also.”

“ ‘ Evelyn ’ : that is, ‘ Miss Rayner, ’ ” said Malcolm ; uttering the name in a defiant tone. The sting of Evelyn ’ s contempt was passing away, and this mood taking its place ; he would not be “ trampled upon. ” He would thoroughly cool down, and then do what he had previously intended ; ask her to dance. But not as a condescension to him ; not with the smallest concern whether she did so or not ; simply as an act of politeness. He would take care that she understood *that*.

Meanwhile, Bligh had replied to his last sentence.

“ Rayner ! ” he said. “ That is your own name ; I heard the steward introduce you just now. Not your sister, of course ? ”

“ First cousin, ” said Malcolm, doggedly.

“ She is not bad-looking either, ” said Bligh ; “ and how exquisitely she dances. Perhaps she and Strachan will make a match of it ; they are still talking toge-

ther. No, now she has joined your party again."

Malcolm ground his teeth with an impatient Psha! although he would have been puzzled to assign any reason for the demonstration. His companion observed it, but made no remark; and soon afterwards they separated, Eldon Bligh crossing over to a different part of the room; one in which, whether of purpose or not, he obtained a better view of the girl who was "not bad-looking"! Malcolm, thus left to himself, recommenced the cooling down process.

It occupied some time; long enough to allow of two more waltzes, in both of which Evelyn danced, although not with Strachan. Then she again joined the Alsagers, and Malcolm, at length, did the same. He had chilled himself to ice, as he imagined, and could meet this supercilious girl on her own platform! But he had to encounter Nina first.

"Are we to congratulate you, Mr. Rayner?" she asked.

"Congratulate?"

"Yes. When a gentleman pays a lady such marked attentions all the evening, dances every dance with her, takes her into supper, and finally disappears with her, as far as can be ascertained, for a couple of hours, it is to be supposed that something will come of it. A nature like Sarah Golightly's is not to be trifled with."

"I am afraid I know nothing about Miss Golightly's nature," said Malcolm, rather curtly. He wished Nina would not talk such nonsense. Every one seemed conspiring to mortify him.

"Oh! Mr. Rayner, can she have refused you?" persisted Nina. "That would quite account for your looking so distraught, and hiding away from us as you have done. Poor Evelyn has been quite disconsolate."

“I was about to ask Miss Rayner if she would favour me for the next waltz,” said Malcolm, with severity; a good deal to the surprise of both ladies. Evelyn however was too vexed to think about it. Here was the partner for whom she had been wishing the whole evening; and, now that he had presented himself, it was too late; her card, as she knew, full for every dance; twice over for some, contingently on the first claimant not keeping faith. How entirely perverse! Why *could* he not have spoken before!

Malcolm must not see the vexation, however. Had he been less in her thoughts, Evelyn would have expressed it frankly enough: as things were, she replied, in the most indifferent tone she could command,

“I . . . that is, I believe I am engaged for everything, thank you.”

Malcolm cast a suspicious glance at the

speaker's card. He was compelled to accept her statement, of course; but he shrewdly doubted it; young ladies, especially in distinguished circles, were quite capable of that version of the "Not at home" formula; it would be their target against plebeian intrusiveness! Perhaps, if very conscientious, she might have a "standing partner" for the evening, some one to fall back upon in the event of objectionable offers! That puppy Strachan, for instance. Yes, and actually!

Yes; actually. As the above surmise flashed through his brain, the puppy did step forward.

"I believe," he said, turning to Malcolm, that I can answer for Miss Rayner as regards this waltz."

He spoke courteously enough, but, as it seemed to the person addressed, with an easy superiority which the courtesy only made more galling. He offered his arm;

Evelyn accepted it; in the next minute, they had disappeared among the *mélée* of dancers, and Malcolm remained, utterly confounded.

“How unlucky,” was Evelyn’s thought, as she observed him from the distance. “The next dance I *will* sit out and have another talk with him, whatever happens. I must explain to him that Mr. Strachan asked me half-an-hour since.”

Easy enough to propose this. But the tide of circumstance at times runs too strong for human purposes!

Gentlemen were scarce that evening; and Malcolm, standing unemployed as he was, caught the steward’s eye the second time. Before he could realise what was happening, he found himself provided with a new partner.

An agreeable one, this time; nice-

looking, lively, and a good waltzer, as Malcolm himself was. There was some consolation in this, and he was acquitting himself satisfactorily to both parties, when the final catastrophe of the evening occurred.

Seated against the wall was the usual row of chaperons, and other non-dancers; amongst the latter, a certain Captain Oliver, who, some sixty years before, had lost his leg in a naval action. The wooden limb with which he had replaced this was an interesting study. It *was* wooden, not of the more precious material for which Miss Kilmanseg stipulated; but it might have saved money to have made it gold in the first instance: with compound interest on the pension annexed, it had cost the country eight thousand pounds and upwards! Then, again, it symbolized not only wealth but learning. Under the auspices of this member, which unscrewed

when required and was a terrible implement of offence, had grown up two generations of Oliver boys; and fine young fellows they were. Lastly, the leg was an annuity to more professions than one: mantua-makers, dentists, doctors, even attorneys, could speak of many a harvest of profit garnered in from it. Never was there a wooden leg more fruitful of disaster: bound by no laws of time or place; respecting neither age nor sex; protruding itself irrepressibly, always exactly where it was least expected and inflicted the most mischief!

And, on this occasion, Malcolm fell a victim to it.

The waltzing swayed, as it often will do, to one side; the side where Captain Oliver was seated. Two or three couples passed unscathed, the sitters making room for them. Then came Malcolm and his partner. Their pace was rapid, dresses

and feet were drawn in still closer to the chairs. It was an opportunity which the leg could not let slip.

Quite suddenly, and without any previous warning, it became rigidly horizontal; stood out from the Captain's seat at right angles. There was a stumble; a crash. Malcolm, who had tripped over the impediment, fell heavily to the ground, having sustained no damage himself, and, as he hoped, saved his partner.

Saved her from falling, he had; but it might have been better otherwise; she had twisted an ankle, and had to be helped from the room in great pain. Malcolm sprung forward to assist, but was repulsed, not by the girl herself but by those who were supporting her, rudely enough. Meanwhile the music stopped, amidst a general buzz of question and answer.

Among the questioners was Algernon Strachan. He and Evelyn were resting on

the opposite side of the room, and the latter, from her position, saw what had really happened: apparently she was the only person who did. Strachan, who had seen nothing, stepped forward with enquiries. "Who was hurt?"

"One of the Egertons," was the reply; "the youngest."

"What, that pretty girl Lucy? How did it happen?"

"Some one threw her down; some awkward lout of a fellow. I don't know his name."

"He is standing two from us now," said another voice; in a demi-whisper, but quite audible to Malcolm, as the previous speech had been. "The party with his hair growing down on the forehead."

Algernon glanced in the direction indicated, shrugged his shoulders slightly, and returned to Evelyn, Malcolm's eyes following him.

What he saw was not of a nature to restore his equanimity. Strachan spoke a few words; evidently repeating what he had just heard. Evelyn replied with equally evident emotion; concern, doubtless, for the sufferer. Then they both looked, as Malcolm thought, directly at himself, and a smile broke over Evelyn's face. Nothing which was pleasant to see, but the reverse; stamping on it that old look of scorn, hauteur, whatever it might be called, which under the circumstances was intolerable.

Malcolm strode from the room, burning with indignation, and very far indeed from divining what had really passed. Evelyn, vexed almost to tears, first by the accident and then by Algernon Strachan's version of it, had commenced an eager defence of Malcolm.

"It was not his fault," she said, "not in the very least; he was tripped up."

“Tripped up?”

“Yes, by an old man with a wooden leg; I don’t know his name, but he is sitting in a line behind Mr. Rayner somewhere; there, I can see him now.” And Evelyn pointed out Captain Oliver accordingly.

Her companion at once apologised. “Pray forgive me,” he said, “at least if Mr. Rayner, as you name him, is any connection of yours. I had no suspicion of it.”

“He is my cousin,” said Evelyn; “he came with us this evening. There, look; he is doing it again!”

As she spoke, the wooden leg once more rose into position. Harmlessly enough this time; but with such a graphic illustration of the mischief it had already done, that Evelyn could not forbear smiling.

A poor little smile enough; it had great ado not to be a sob. And yet in that

smile, recalling as it did the alien expression of some features long laid in the dust, was built up between her and Malcolm a great wall of separation !

When Malcolm left the room, he had visions of walking back to Chigwell, or possibly to London, just as he was ; dress boots and all. He fetched his hat from the cloak-room, and was already in the street, when he encountered Clarges Alsager.

“I have just been for the carriages,” said the latter; “the mater is tired. Would you mind fetching her out? We shall go back as we came,” he added, “she with you and Nina. Your carriage will be up directly.”

Impossible for Malcolm to refuse. In fact, as he would thus escape being thrown with Evelyn, it was the best arrangement ;

a twenty miles' walk home in a winter's night would undoubtedly have excited comment ! But his departure should take place by day-break.

And so it did.

Little was said on the return home, which they reached before the rest of the party. Malcolm apologised for the discredit he had brought on his hosts ; and Nina, who was as ignorant as Malcolm himself of the real cause of his misadventure, administered consolation. "Accidents must happen : her own dress was in ribands."

But there was no real healing in this ; and even if there had been, Malcolm would not have accepted it. He betook himself at once to his room ; was up betimes,—the only person stirring in the house ; left a few lines for Clarges, and apologies for Mrs. Alsager ; and, by nine o'clock, was en route for London.

Then, with departure, came reflection. The house was visible for some distance along the road; and, as Malcolm looked back at it, he gained, for the first time, some intuition of what his feeling to Evelyn had really been;—or rather, might have become, had she been different herself!

“I have had an escape,” he thought. “I was getting really to care for her. And the utter fool I should have made of myself; the laughing-stock of herself and her friends for months to come! However, that is all quite over: last night would have cured infatuation itself. I shall soon have forgotten all about it.”

And with this conviction, at which he arrived just as the “Beeches” finally disappeared from view, Malcolm fortified himself accordingly.

CHAPTER IX.

ON the evening of the same day, Malcolm and his father were seated together after dinner. John Rayner had returned late from his round of drawing-lessons, and was too fagged for much during the meal. Now, a glass of wine had restored him, and he settled into his arm-chair with a sense of relief.

The dining-room had little to boast of either in size or equipments: Gower-street was not a distinguished location. A lustreless table and sideboard, with some worn leather chairs, composed the furniture; the carpet and red curtains were in keeping

with it, frayed and faded; and the walls were ornamented with a selection from the father's unsold paintings. Still, under its present aspect, the room was endurable. The blaze lighted up these surroundings cheerfully; concealed their defects, and invested them with an air of comfort which daylight would have dispelled. And, at all events, it was home.

Home, in one sense, but not in all; the main element, the wife and mother, was wanting to the scene. Mrs. Rayner had been absent for some months, and probably would be until the spring; exiled to Dawlish. Anxiety and the loss of children had much broken her; and coupled with these was the feeling that, but for his union with her, John Rayner's life would have been a widely different one: for drudgery and disappointment would have been substituted the affluence of Stanton Court. John himself never felt this, still less breathed a whisper

of reproach on any such score; but the wife felt it for him, and it preyed upon her: spirits and health gradually gave way. And now, this winter, there was undoubted mischief at the chest. Devonshire was prescribed, and the prescription had been punctually obeyed; contracting still further John Rayner's slender income, and inflicting upon him many a solitary hour in addition. He was heartily glad of Malcolm's return this evening.

"They treated you civilly there?" he asked; the question of course referring to the Alsagers.

Malcolm eulogized his reception as it merited; then the Chigwell ménage was discussed, inside and out. Its inmates, male and female; their names, ages, looks, characters, avocations; the dogs, the horses; everything and everybody Malcolm enlarged upon, naïvely and eagerly; his father occasionally interposing with a

question, but for the most part well content to listen.

Everything and everybody, with one exception. Of Evelyn, Malcolm spoke not one syllable. Why should he?

No reason why he should, of course. John Rayner might have remained in profound ignorance of all that concerned her, had not an accidental question brought her to the forefront.

“Do they keep much company?” he asked?

“Only one formal dinner party while I was there. But there is always some one coming or going.”

“Visitors staying in the house, I suppose?”

“No one but myself, this Christmas,” said Malcolm; “there is no room when

they are all at home. Myself and their cousin," he added.

"What was his name, my boy?"

"Not a he," said Malcolm with some hesitation. "Miss Rayner; Evelyn Rayner, that is. You know whom I mean, papa."

Unquestionably John knew; and greatly discomposed he was by the idea which the name suggested. He abandoned his arm chair, and paced up and down the room for some minutes, ejaculating to himself. The exclamation was the same which Malcolm had uttered when first told of Evelyn's presence at the Beeches—"That girl there!"

John Rayner paused at last in front of his son, and looked steadily at him.

"How long has she been there?" he asked.

"The whole time," said Malcolm.

"And you have remained there? sleeping under the same roof; eating and drinking

at the same table with her? You have stooped low enough for that?"

"I could not exactly help myself," said Malcolm. "There were engagements made for me before I came: then there was a county ball at Chelmsford last night, which the Alsagers insisted on my going to. It would have been uncivil to have left sooner."

Malcolm spoke with as much nonchalance as he could assume; but do what he could, he could not prevent the colour mounting in his face, and even by the imperfect light, John Rayner saw it.

He resumed his seat, and some minutes elapsed before he again spoke.

"Malcolm, my boy," he said at last. The words were gently uttered, but in a tone which showed profound agitation.

"Yes, papa?"

"I have not been a harsh father to you, I think?"

“The kindest, dearest of fathers. Never had a son more cause for gratitude.”

“I have done but my duty. But Malcolm, I shall have to put your affection to the test now. It would be terrible to me if you were thinking of Evelyn Rayner; thinking of her with any thought of love.”

“That I am certainly not doing,” said Malcolm. “At least . . .”

He paused abruptly: there was something at his heart which compelled him to retract the unqualified denial he had just uttered.

“At least what?”

The son was still silent. John Rayner looked at him intently.

“It is as I feared then,” he said, after a further pause. “You do care for this girl.”

“I think perhaps that I did; or nearly did,” Malcolm answered at last, very slowly. It was the first avowal in words of the truth which had begun to dawn

upon him during the last twenty-four hours.

“Has anything passed between you?”

“Certainly not, papa; it was just a passing fancy. And an utterly absurd one,” he added with some bitterness. “Nothing ever can, or could, possibly come of it.”

John Rayner rose from his seat once more, in the deepest emotion. Advancing to Malcolm, he took both hands of the latter between his own, and pressed them fervently.

“Malcolm, my boy,” he said, “you promise me that?”

“Promise, papa?”

“Yes; promise me that, as you say, nothing shall ever come of this passing fancy. That never, under any circumstances, will you seek the hand of Evelyn Rayner in marriage.”

Malcolm again hesitated: there was a

conflict of thought within him for which he was unprepared. As far as his judgment, and, in fact, his present feelings, or one section of them went, he had no scruple in giving the required assurance. "Seek Evelyn in marriage?" Madness to dream of such a thing; yes, and humiliation too: had he not undergone insult enough?

Yes; but this was the surface emotion only; beneath it was a tide setting the other way altogether! Do what he would, Malcolm could not quite dam it back. And he hesitated accordingly.

John Rayner saw the conflict, and continued with still greater earnestness.

"Malcolm," he said, "your mother and yourself are all I have in the world; and she cannot be with me much longer. I must not deceive myself. Every day she writes me that she will soon be strong again; and if a bright spirit and loving

heart could make her so, she soon would be. But there is no real improvement that I can make out; coughing and coughing, and wasting and wasting; just the old story going on."

"You must not be despondent, papa," said Malcolm. He spoke cheerfully, but inwardly his apprehensions told the same tale as John Rayner's. The latter shook his head.

"We must look it in the face, Malcolm," he said. "Only, if sorrow comes, let us encounter it together."

"That I hope we always shall."

"So do I, Malcolm. But the union of which I have spoken, even the bare suspicion of it, would finally separate us: I could not hold up my head under it. You say yourself that nothing can ever come of the acquaintance you have formed with Evelyn Rayner. Do you hesitate to give me your assurance that it never shall; to

spare me added anxiety in the trouble which is coming upon us?"

Why should Malcolm not do so? Again, as he thus reflected, he decided that he would; and again some inexplicable feeling restrained him. John Rayner still pressed his request.

"Malcolm," he said, "I am surprised that you should hesitate. Even were your affections actually engaged to your cousin, you must feel that there is an impassable barrier between you: any alliance with her would be intolerable. Could you bear it yourself? Bear to sneak back, as it were, into your rights; make your marriage the means of reinstating yourself in house and lands?"

"Certainly not, papa," Malcolm answered, and this time, without a moment's delay. His pride was roused by John Rayner's suggestion; the balance of the contending forces within was disturbed;

resentment, for the time being at all events, drove its adversary from the field. "Sneak back!" Yes; and how much worse should he try to do so, and fail, as he undoubtedly would fail; be repulsed as the "fortune-hunter" he had himself denounced! Utterly hopeless, utterly absurd, in any case, any suit of his to Evelyn Rayner; but, from this point of view, dishonourable also!

"Most certainly not," he repeated in a still firmer tone.

"You promise me then?"

"Yes."

"You will never join Evelyn's hand with yours in marriage; will accept from her neither fortune nor favour of any kind?"

"I will not."

"You promise it, as we are son and father; as we are living man and man; as

we stand together here before the All-Seeing?"

"I do."

"Then God bless you, my boy. During the few years my life has to run, nothing can ever now separate us."

CHAPTER X.

MALCOLM Rayner was not the only person to whom the Chelmsford ball had been fruitful of after-reflection. His temporary companion there, Eldon Bligh, also found his thoughts travelling back to it, oftener than he could have anticipated.

We have much to do with Eldon Bligh, and the reader must be told something about him before proceeding.

When Eldon spoke of himself as living at Chelmsford, he meant that his family did so, or rather, its sole surviving member in the previous generation; a certain Aunt Margaret, his father's sister. The Blighs

had been Chelmsford people for a century and more, owning lands there, and visiting in county society at large. But, of late, their fortunes had been in decadence. The members of the house had died off, and its property had dwindled at the same time; Aunt Margaret had a moderate income, but it would expire with her; the rest was gone. As to Eldon, his means, exclusive of bar-earnings, were most limited; and the bar-earnings did little at present to cement the necessary alliance between soul and body. His chambers were in the Middle Temple, and there he mostly lived. Chelmsford however was still "home;" Eldon's own room was kept for him, and this he occupied, a night or a score of nights, as leisure and inclination served.

Meanwhile, the social status of the family had not changed with its fortunes. The tenacity which makes county society exclusive ensures its constancy; the entrée

is difficult, but, once admitted, you need not fear proscription ; poor or rich are not its terms of membership. More than one coronet would be displayed before Miss Bligh's porch which the wealthiest parvenus round could not entice within their lodge-gates !

Hence it was that Eldon Bligh had done duty at the ball. He was no great dancer, and grudged the night's sleep ; it meant loss of the next day's work. But to Aunt Margaret the ball was all-important ; to have missed it, would have disturbed her sense of personal identity. She had good qualities of head as well as heart, but paramount above all was the necessity of upholding the Bligh position ; it was as the breath of life in her nostrils. And the county ball was the express voucher for this ; a roll-call of the order, at which all who belonged to it must pass muster.

Specially and exceptionally important,

too, had this last ball been. A family disaster had occurred; and it was imperative to show that the status had not been altered by it.

Some twelve months before, a sister of Eldon's, his only next of kin except Aunt Margaret, had made a ruinous marriage; or, to speak more correctly, she had not made a marriage at all. She had gone through its forms; eloping from the Chelmsford house, where she still resided, but believing unquestionably in the validity of the rite. Nor was there any ceremonial flaw as such: none in the license, none in the priest's orders; neither response nor canticle left unsaid. But there *was* a fatal drawback for all that;—the bridegroom had a wife still living!

The fact came to light a few weeks after this mock wedding. Some little money which Alice Bligh owned had been realized by the man she eloped with. When this

was spent, he ill-treated her; took to drinking; and at length, stung by some remonstrance of hers, told her what her real position was. Something in his manner satisfied Alice that he spoke truly. She quitted the house immediately, and fled to Eldon's chambers; then, when the facts were finally ascertained, drew the wedding ring from her finger, and encountered life as she best might.

It was no very protracted struggle. Aunt Margaret made the fugitive an allowance, but declined to receive her back at Chelmsford; impossible that she should do so. Her social atmosphere would have become untenable; tainted with mistrust, or chilled with indifference and neglect!

So the matter was hushed up, and his sister's charge devolved on Eldon. In the old Chelmsford times there had been little in common between the two. Alice's was an every-day nature, not heartless or bad,

but superficial ; Eldon's, one of deep, quick feeling, concealed beneath a cynicism which had become habitual. His sister's frivolity repelled him ; every emotion with himself was so ardent that he could not understand shallowness in others. But now, this was all changed. Eldon augmented Aunt Margaret's allowance out of his own scant earnings ; took a lodging for Alice in the outskirts of London ; and spent most of his evenings there with her, importing into them such cheerfulness as he could.

But his companionship was not needed long. Grief ; disappointment ; remorse ;—they are sore adversaries even for a robust frame, and Alice's was none such : she sunk under their impact like a flower stricken at the root. Within six months from her elopement earth's troubles were over for her. Eldon was with her to the last, tending her in her self-abasement and suffering. Then he followed her remains

to their interment in a South London cemetery, and, in due time, placed over them a simple cross, with the name and date.

Of small value that record ! Within another six months, Alice Bligh and her story were as absolutely forgotten as if she had deceased under the Heptarchy. But on Eldon's own character the past had stamped itself indelibly. Repeatedly, in the later weeks of her illness, as he watched the thin cheek and drooping frame, he had asked himself, Whose doing was this ? Had not this young life been put in *his* charge ? “ Man is strong, woman weak.” His was the arm on which Alice might have leant for support ; had he ever held it out to her ? What word of counsel had he ever breathed ; what interest had he evinced in her ? Sympathy of Alice's he could recall, and did so with exquisite pain ;—nothing very uniform or

deep, but still, kindly sympathy as far as it went. But had there been any return on his part? And yet it was he who had condemned; he who had termed his sister heartless and frivolous!

It was thus that, even during her illness, the wrung heart had travailed in its self-accusation. And now, after death, all was intensified. The tremendous realities of life presented themselves as they had never yet done; the unseen world asserted its place. It was not against Alice only that Eldon had erred; his shortcomings,—and hers,—would be judged at a higher tribunal. There were times when he would have surrendered every ambition in the future to have recalled these last few years.

But we are not meant to live in any past: repentance is the utilization of the present. From the furnace of self-reproach Eldon emerged a new man; profoundly

humbled, but not made morbid ; altered in interest and purpose, but in no way parading the change ; not even divesting himself of the cynicism which was habitual to him. The reader may think that it would have been more consistent had he done so. But perhaps the truest thing in human nature is its inconsistency.

Amongst other practical results which developed themselves in Eldon's new character was his presence at this Chelmsford ball. He went to it like the fillet-wreathed ox to the shrine of sacrifice ; escorting Aunt Margaret, who was speedily absorbed by her own "set," and anticipating the dreariest of evenings. But virtue brings its own reward. Never had time passed more pleasantly ! For society indeed Eldon had done little enough ; danced such duty dances as fell to his lot, but done little else.

But he had found occupation enough himself. Allowing for some intervals, during which chance or good manners interfered, it had consisted in—looking at Evelyn Rayner !

Merely as a connoisseur, of course. Eldon would have scorned the idea of anything beyond this : did he not know the sex ? Frivolous ; weak ; vacillating ; some surface-differences, but the identity of type-idea running throughout. Still, as a connoisseur, and from a surface point of view only, Eldon was considerably impressed by the face. “ Not bad-looking,” he had said to Malcolm Rayner. But this was conventionalism : speaking as he felt, he would have said, “ beautiful.” And beauty really of a high order ; soul and intellect, so far as women could possess either, setting their stamp upon it ; the loveable, or what to a more susceptible gazer might become such, mirrored in the eye-entrancing !

Such speculation, however, interesting as it may be, is dangerous when applied to actual flesh and blood. Canvas and marble may be criticized innocently enough; a Pygmalion occurs but once in history; but the changing tints, the pulsation and breath of life, are different matters. And when Eldon Bligh at length got to bed that night, he experienced a result from his evening's occupation which rather disquieted him. Malcolm's answer to his inquiry had supplied Evelyn's christian name as well as surname; and now, all night long, they both haunted him; he fell sound asleep, but they wove themselves into his dreams. Just at present, by way of variety, there *was* some work in chambers; a Welsh pedigree-case, in which the "Owen Morgan," and "Hugh Jones" of each generation became the "Morgan Owen" and "John Hughes" of the next, and vice versâ. But

in Eldon's dreams the entanglement grew far worse; male or female, parent or child, everybody was called Evelyn! In fact, things hardly righted themselves in chambers next day. There was no "Rayner" on the brief-sheets; that was quite certain. But between the retina and the brain somewhere, the Owens and Morgans all got turned into it. Altogether, it was the best part of a week before Eldon could finally shake off the incubus, and say to himself, that, for a mere face, Miss Rayner's had "impressed him very favourably."

Such were the results which the Chelmsford ball, or rather Evelyn's presence there, had produced on two of the persons with whom our story is concerned. How has it fared with herself since that evening?

The feelings with which Evelyn entered

the ball-room, only half avowed to her own heart, had become a distinct, objective fact before she quitted it ; Malcolm's disaster, and its consequences, lifted from the frank nature whatever veil of self-disguise still lay upon it. Even in the room the tears had nearly risen to her eyes. Before sleep visited her pillow that night, or rather, in the January dawn on which it had encroached, they had fallen fast. However, the sleep came at last, and happily enough : it would be all right next day.

But, next day, things were ten times worse. Malcolm,—“ he,” as the name shaped itself in Evelyn's maiden consciousness,—had retired from the scene altogether. No opportunity of meeting ; no farewell ; nothing !

Evelyn was bitterly disappointed ; all brightness had died out of the house ; she felt wretched. The day was dismal, snow

turning to sleet, sleet reverting to snow, and rain coming on the back of both. Everybody was tired; and the few who were not out of temper seemed to make matters worse for the majority who were.

Eventually, Evelyn slipped away to her own room. She tried not to think of Malcolm; but the attempt was hopeless, and she gave it up ere long; thought roamed where it would. Unkind, that he should have gone away thus, making no sign; saying no parting word, leaving no message even. But then, why expect him to do either? What was she to him in any case? Their lots were cast hopelessly apart; he would return to his college, forget that they had even met; were they ever thrown together again, would probably fail to recognise her!

Singular, too, that he *should* have left so abruptly: why was it? Nobody seemed to know. Could he have overheard what

was said; the words which Strachan had repeated to her;—she almost hated him for doing so;—so unjust, so untrue? Yes, they might have reached Malcolm's ear; and with his intense sensitiveness too! That he *was* sensitive Evelyn was quite sure; every look, every gesture shewed it; every syllable he had uttered in their long talk together!

How unspeakably pleasant that talk had been to her, how full of interest; full of himself, his tastes, pursuits, predilections! And now, everything was over. Only forty-eight hours since then, and already this great gulf of division between them! Had she only something, the merest trifle, to recall him by; something external, tangible; some representative-shape of the actual self!

Hold, though; was there not something? What a fortunate thought! That scrap of music, the paper on which he had jotted

down his "Wilhelmine;" had he taken it away? She could not recollect his doing so; it had been propped inside a song-book while they tried it together; might it not still be there?

Feeling extremely guilty, Evelyn stole down to the drawing-room, and peeped in.

Empty, as good fortune would have it. It was a moment's work to find the book she was in quest of, turn over the leaves; discover the manuscript between them. Unshapely; blurred and blotted with the composer's rude notation;—but how priceless!

It was secured: Evelyn regained her room, undetected. And then . . .

Then she drew the paper from her pocket. Gazed round furtively, as if scores of eyes were peering at her from the chintz curtains, the wardrobe, the cheval-glass, the books, the pictures. Then, imprinted

upon it a bashful, bashful maiden kiss ; but so deep, so tender, so true ! Then she would not trust herself further, but locked the “representative-shape” into some innermost shrine of privacy, secure from abstraction, as from intrusion.

Judge her not austere, kind reader. Woman’s whole heart is made for love ;—what is it worth, if it does not love early and ungrudgingly ? Would you like it better if it paused for mature selection, instead of surrendering itself in some unforgotten first meeting, it may be in some half-minute’s glance which has been indelible, to that which is its woman’s destiny ;—confiding, and suffering ?

Could Malcolm only have seen what was going on !

Ah ! but they had parted ! The heart of each, although, as regarded one of the two, with little consciousness of the fact as yet, irretrievably knitted with that of the other ;

but the two lives parted, by an utter, absolute mistake. One most easily rectified in itself; but to any actual correction of which circumstances seemed to oppose themselves with the tenacity of iron.

CHAPTER XI.

WE must return to Paulina Guidi; the fiancée, as will be remembered, of the widower, Charles Rayner; and, as such, shortly to become Evelyn's step-mother. The time is some two or three months later than our last chapter; the first week in April. Paulina's marriage is to take place about the middle of the month.

On the part of Evelyn's grandfather, Philip Rayner, his son's choice had met with no opposition. That Charles should remarry and have male issue was the old man's chief anxiety; the particular person he might select, within certain limits, was matter of indifference. As regarded

Paulina, she was without fortune, but the alliance was a creditable one otherwise. Philip Rayner would have preferred some property, and preferred an Englishwoman out and out; but this would do well enough.

To Charles he accordingly wrote, giving his full consent to the marriage, and conveying his good wishes, with instructions for a handsome present, to the bride elect. As to settlements, Philip added, the necessity was superseded; the instrument he had drawn up twenty-one years before, excluding John and John's children, and substituting Charles and his issue in their place, already contained a provision for any widow of the latter. Should Paulina survive Charles, Stanton Court and the estates would be hers for life.

All very well this, as far as the letter

itself went; when it was handed to Paulina, she perused it with entire satisfaction. But there was a postscript which was less satisfactory; Charles Rayner did not seem to think much of it, but Paulina did. It ran as follows.

“By the way,” Philip added, “you must bear in mind, and this young lady also, that the settlement is a revocable one: I have the power of altering it, or annulling it altogether. It is wholly improbable that I shall ever do this, but the power is, in fact, reserved to me.”

“Wholly improbable.” Yes, Philip Rayner wrote as he felt. The clause had been inserted, partly at the suggestion of his solicitor, Mr. Miles, and partly from a feeling on Philip’s own part that he did not choose to give the reins altogether out of his own hands. But for all practical purposes, John’s disinheritance was complete and final; no reversal ever could or

would take place. And Charles Rayner, although aware that the power existed, attached no importance to it accordingly.

But to Paulina the matter looked much more serious. Why, here, in black and white, depending only on an old man's caprice, was something which with one stroke of the pen, might demolish the whole fabric of fortune she had built up!

Paulina's was no love-match, and she had never pretended to herself that it was. More than twice her age; feeble in frame, purpose, intellect; barely roused, even by his present passion for herself, from the inertness which had been his normal state:—it was difficult to say that she did not hate Charles Rayner!

And for this she must be compensated. If it was a money-bargain, a matter of scales and weights, the price must be paid in full; no fraction abated, nothing left

insecure. And yet here was unforeseen mischief; insecurity on the very threshold! What should she do?

At the time, Paulina did nothing: merely handed back the letter to Charles, with some trivial remark. But she thought profoundly over the matter afterwards. Was the position, with this contingency hanging over it, worth maintaining?

We must not dwell on her dissection of the problem. Eventually, after anxious thought, Paulina decided that it was; she would hold to her bargain; better the chance than nothing at all. Besides, the reversal of the settlement was only a risk; it might be guarded against. She was to reside at Stanton Court; be practically, even at present, its mistress. Opportunities enough for bringing her influence to bear on the feebleness of an old man!

So the engagement had gone on as arranged. All this was, of course, in its

early stages ; now it is April, and the ceremony fixed for a week or two hence.

But at present the bride elect is not with her lover. She has escaped from him, and is spending a few days at her former home, Amalfi, where the Contessa still retains her house.

The last month of this period has been one of sore trouble to Paulina ; the nearer the time came for redeeming her promise, the more she shrunk from it. Heart, in some fashion, she did possess ; and, such as it was, she had given it wholly to Stephen Luxmoor ; her love for him was the one honest purpose of her life !

Gradually, a burning desire sprung up within her, a woman's longing, to revisit Amalfi before this . . . this accursed union,—Paulina almost spoke the word—should have taken place. Let her view the

familiar scenes for the last time ; tread the ground she had trod in Stephen's company ; hear his voice once more on shore and hill-side !

The craving was irresistible. Some easily-devised excuse satisfied the Contessa ; some "personal matters to be seen to in the old house ; articles there, which Paulina would prefer to pack herself ;" this or that plausibility of the kind. If the daughter wanted to go, useless either to question or oppose her.

So to Amalfi Paulina went, and went alone ; expressly and purposely so ; society of any kind would have been intolerable. The Contessa's company was not requested, and without her, Charles could not offer his. He could only intreat for as brief an absence as possible.

Paulina however did very little to ex-

pedite matters. There was no route by Salerno then; Castellamare was reached, and then you followed a mountain road, rugged and laborious. This occupied time; and, once at Amalfi, Paulina delayed still longer; she could not tear herself from the place. We must not claim much sympathy for her, but she deserved some at present; she was utterly miserable. Had she met Stephen Luxmoor, she must have surrendered everything; knelt to him, implored to be taken back; told him that she lived only in and for his love!

But it was not to be. The die must fall as she had thrown it; the inevitable end, reaching far beyond this already hateful marriage, be wrought out. No destiny shaped it; no malign star controlled it; the sea-waves never chaunted it, nor the sky darkened with its prophecy. Self-chosen, self-invoked. The hand that sowed, reaped; the sinning was the arti-

ficer of the doomed! But wrought out the end must be; and even now, unforeseen and unsuspected, the means were in preparation. This visit to Amalfi was among them.

The most vivid of Paulina's memories there was identified, as it had reason to be, with the secluded ravine known as the Dragone gorge. In one of its hamlets lived Paulina's nurse, Veronica Sonzi; and it was on a visit to Veronica, in which Stephen Luxmoor accompanied her, that the then lovers had first avowed their attachment. Each had divined the other's secret. The one burning kiss which Stephen had snatched, and, in his uprightness, forborne to repeat, had added nothing to this knowledge; the freedom left to Paulina, the absence of any definite betrothal, could detract nothing from it. Nothing, so long as both were true.

Yes; but now, one had played false! But of this Paulina would not think; she thrust it from her; her mind was made up on that point. But, revisit the Dragone she must and would. It was an easy walk, and to-day was her last chance. Let her start forthwith.

The spring forenoon was exquisite, as, often enough, it fails to be in Italy, whatever presumptions the latitude may palm off on intending visitors. Often enough is April piloted there by blasts from Alp or Appennine, chilling to the marrow in the carpetless rooms, or drenching with rain out of doors. But this spring deserved its name; suns shone and seas glittered; from the lap almost of winter, the quick growths of the south leapt into colour and fragrance.

On the last descent to the hamlet, Paulina paused, and looked down on a fair scene. In its main features the

Dragone is gloomy enough ; sterile crags, distorted and abrupt, wall in both sides of the valley. But other portions are more open ; woods of olive and chestnut ; the lemon and orange, contrasting with both ; arcades of trellised vines, with the church towers of the villages gleaming between them. Pre-occupied as she was, Paulina admired ; she could not fail to do so.

But the beauty brought no calm with it, rather the contrary. Again and again the tears rose ; hot, scalding drops, not of healing, but of remorse. These fair surroundings, earth and sky, flowers and foliage, of what use were they ? They seemed to mock, to defy her ; taunting her with what she had voluntarily renounced ; putting the seal to her final exclusion from all hope, all light ! Why torture herself further ? Why proceed with this senseless walk ?

But the torture would not be foregone.

Immediately below her was Veronica's cottage; she could see the sun glittering on one of its casements. And in the garden outside the cottage, on a rustic bench shadowed by the quaint carouba-pods, had Paulina sat with Stephen Luxmoor; her lips had met his, her heart beat against his, her love plighted itself, in fact if not in word, to be his only for ever. She *must* go there; re-enact in memory the very scene at the very place. It was exquisite pain, but she *must* do it!

CHAPTER XII.

“And you are happy?” asked Veronica when the first greetings were over: “and well? Ah! but I need not ask that. How beautiful is my child; what eyes; what carriage; what complexion! How Giuseppe would admire! To think that the bambinella I nursed with him should have shot up into this!”

In explanation of which speech it should be observed that Giuseppe Sonzi was Paulina's foster-brother. The Contessa's health after the birth of the latter had compelled the importation of Veronica, who however stipulated that she should bring her own infant with her.

Paulina smiled at her nurse's enthusiasm. Mere vanity was not among her sins, and she was more amused than flattered by the eulogy.

"I might have been a black-a-moor," she said; "or might have squinted, or had red hair. What would you have done then, Veronica?"

"A black-a-moor!" retorted the nurse; "*rengrazziamo Dio!* But the woman you have grown, *figliuola mia!* Last summer you were a child still, seeing the flowers and the fruit-blossoms; but now you look all inwards; you are the woman. Ah! and I can guess the reason why, darling. It is all so changed when that happens; just like the young lambs when the spring is over. And she was so secret too, my lady-bird was; she would not tell the old nurse about it! But the nurse had eyes, but no tongue; no, none, none!"

In proof of which assertion, Veronica

screwed up her lips as if in preparation for their being padlocked.

A deep crimson overspread Paulina's handsome face. She well knew what her companion referred to, and hastened to change the subject accordingly. The self-inflicted pain she could bear, something compelled her to it in spite of herself; but for another to probe the wound was intolerable.

"And this good Giuseppe?" Paulina asked; "you have not told me of him. We have hardly met since he was a school-boy."

Veronica, who was a lively little woman, clapped her hands. "What think you Giuseppe has become?" she asked.

"I cannot guess, Veronica. A soldier?"

"Soldato! and his mother still living! He is not so abandoned. And Giuseppe has brains; too useful to be sent adrift by a lead bullet. He is in a profession, the boy is."

“ A lawyer ? ”

“ Piano, piano. Giuseppe has a conscience.”

“ Not a priest ? ”

Veronica sighed. “ I did hope,” she said ; “ but he and Carlotta . . . Well, there, it is the old story, and she will make him a good wife when he can afford one. No, Giuseppe is a doctor.”

“ Is he in practice yet ? ” Paulina asked. She liked her foster-brother, and in their young days they had spent pleasant times together.

“ Practice ! No one in Sorrento would think of dying without him, or being born either. And the cures he has made ! Old Luino, the bookseller there ; you know him ? ”

“ No, indeed, Veronica.”

“ It was eight years since he had got out of bed,” said Veronica ; “ his daughter had sold all his clothes, as he couldn’t

possibly want them any more; that was before Giuseppe came to see him. He only attended a week, and, next Sunday, Luino walked to mass in his new things, and looking quite clean. People said that was the more surprising cure of the two."

"Giuseppe is settled at Sorrento then?"

"Yes, but he is often over at Amalfi. And, what am I thinking of? To-day is what, figliuola mia, what day of the week?"

"Tuesday," said Paulina.

"That is it, then; first Tuesday in the month; you will see him if you care to stay till the evening. He comes over to-day to the hospital in the cathedral square, the fanciullo esposto; comes to draw the children's teeth, gli poverini; he takes them out faster than you could count. 'Granda grandinata,' the neighbours all cry out, and run to the windows. But he comes over to see the old mother afterwards. You will wait for Giuseppe?"

"I fear not," said Paulina; "it is my last day but one, and I am very busy."

"You leave Amalfi then? But when do you come back for good, you and the Contessa?"

"For good!" echoed Paulina bitterly. "But, Veronica, we shall never come back at all, at least, I shall not; I am going to be married."

Again Veronica clapped her hands. "Did I not say it?" she exclaimed. "The old nurse's eyesight was not so bad, after all. And he is so handsome, for an Englishman; so tall and grand-looking! I thought so, as he stood in the porch waiting for you that day."

Paulina's cheek flushed again, and with a still deeper crimson; but she was compelled to speak.

"It is not Stephen . . . not the gentleman you mean," she said in a low voice.

A look of disappointment, mixed with surprise, crossed Veronica's face; but she hastened to remove any pain which her words might have caused.

"Ah!" she said, "did it not come off then? Povera! But they are false, these men; they amuse themselves just while it suits their pleasure, and never think it is human hearts they are breaking. Il perfido! But we need not mind him; my darling has some one worthy of her now. And is this an Englishman also?"

"Yes," answered Paulina. She did not attempt to undeceive her companion as to Stephen Luxmoor; the pain would have been too sharp.

"And you will live in England?" asked Veronica, with a slight shiver, as if, even at such a distance, the climate made itself felt.

"I suppose so. Yes, certainly."

"And the Contessa with you? Ah,

no ? But then you will be all alone ; have no friends : and this man may be false too. Child, you must protect yourself : before marrying it is hard enough to bear ; but afterwards, . . . misericordia ! But that is what you came for to-day, no doubt ; partly to see the old nurse, and partly for that."

"For what ?"

"Why, for the occhio, of course," said Veronica. "And I can shew you where it grows too ; but you must gather it with your own hands. When is the marriage ?"

"The week after next."

"Possibile ? And you leave Amalfi so soon ! Ah ! you have no time to lose ; we must go to-day, go at once. The flower takes twenty-four hours in drying."

"The flower ! what do you mean ? What flower ?"

"The occhio d'oro," said Veronica ; "have you never heard of it ? No girl

hereabouts marries without a bunch; although the tiniest piece will do."

"Do for what, Veronica?"

"Why, for the philtro, child; bevanda che induce ad amare. But you are innocent; you know not these men. Vergine santissima! Let them have said more vows than there are prayers in father Giacinto's breviary, and they will break them all. They would barter Paradise for a pair of black eyes. That is the good of the philtro, it cures them of it; keeps them from looking where they have no business; you drop a pinch of it in anything they are going to drink, wine, or coffee, or anything, and they never find out what has happened. And nothing does happen, only they stay at home with their wives like buoni Christiani; as long as it lasts, that is; then they must have another dose."

"And is the place far from here?" asked

Paulina. She had not paid much attention to Veronica; her heart was too heavy; nor would the subject have interested her had she done so. Little to gain by a potion which would secure Charles Rayner's love in perpetuity! But Paulina could not yet tear herself from the spot. To quit it was to part finally, as it were, from hope and truth; the last strands would be cut, the bark sent adrift without chart or rudder! Let her humour her companion; go in quest of this wonder-working flower. To wait for Guiseppe was impossible; but this walk promised an hour or two's delay, and she grasped at it.

"The place where this plant grows: is it far from here?"

"No, no, within sight almost. You know that ruin, up on the hill yonder?"

"The Hermitage, you mean. Is it there?"

"Not far from it," said Veronica.

"There is a patch of olives; then you go down very steeply, past some cottages, and there is a hollow with cliffs, where the stream loses itself in a cave; goes underground: the Bocca di lupo we call it. Do you not know it?"

"No," answered Paulina. "I have been to the Hermitage with Giuseppe, but never beyond it."

"It is lonely enough," said Veronica, "and dismal, too; I would not be there after nightfall for a thousand scudi; but it is the best place to find the occhio. But, presto, there is no time to lose. The sun dips."

The Bocca justified Veronica's description. The ravine by which they approached it had been formed by a landslip at some distant period, through the débris of which, overgrown with brushwood, a

rough path wound to the mouth of the cavern. Here the cliff was high and beetling; and, as if to enhance the gloom of the place, the stream suddenly quitted its natural course through the ravine, and, entering the Bocca, disappeared in a rock-cauldron at its extremity.

“Just as if it went in there on purpose,” said Veronica; “see how it spins round and round, whirr, whirr, whirr, like a boy’s top! They say it comes out on the other side of the hill, at Castellamare. But, here is the occhio.”

The flower spoke for itself; it grew profusely, the spot of bright yellow in the calix from which it takes its name seeming to light up the secluded glen in which they stood. Paulina gathered such of the blossoms as were pointed out to her; over each of these her companion recited an incantation of some kind, and placed it in a book which she had brought with her. Then she turned to leave the spot.

But Paulina did not follow her. She had taken little interest in her nurse's proceedings, but the scene itself had a stronger attraction for her. Let her explore that gloomy cavern, gaze down into those depths of troubled water!

At the mouth of the Bocca the stream occupied the entire aperture, leaving only a narrow shelf of rock above it. But Paulina was young and active, and to traverse this to the interior, a distance of eight or ten feet, was an easy task. Here the cavern expanded, the deep trough, or cauldron, into which the stream emptied itself, occupying the further corner, while nearer at hand, continuing the ledge, was a platform of broken rock. Paulina stepped on to this, and peered down into the gulf. The swirl and rush of the water harmonized with her excited feeling; she could almost have plunged in to share the tumult. And yet, how helpless would anything be in those eddies!

A child's toy, dropped from one of the cottages they had passed on their way, was borne down by the stream, and entered the whirlpool. Paulina watched it until it disappeared; then she looked round for something else to throw in. Meanwhile, however, Veronica had discovered her absence.

"Paulina!" she exclaimed in consternation, "have you lost your senses? Man, woman, or child in this valley would not go two steps into the place!"

"Why not?"

"Why not! Why, it is a *luogo maledetto*," said Veronica, crossing herself; "there are spirits, *scellerati*, there. To think my child should have ventured inside! What would the father Giacinto say!"

"He is not very likely to see me," said Paulina. "However, Veronica, I will come out directly; I am only looking for

something to throw into the stream. Here, this will do."

Paulina's eye had been caught by a tuft of the *occhio* which grew in a crevice of the rock near her. It yielded to her grasp after some resistance, but brought down with it a mass of rubbish and loose stones, filling the place with dust. When this cleared away, Paulina threw the tuft into the stream, and watched it disappear as the toy had done; then she prepared to quit the *Bocca*.

But her feat had brought an unexpected actor on the scene. Between her and the ledge she would have to traverse, with its head towards the outlet, lay one of the snakes which give its name to the gorge: of no great size, but, as Paulina well knew, of evil name in the district. The fall of the rubbish had dislodged it, and it lay coiled almost close to her, ready to strike on the least provocation. She was unseen

at present, but sound or movement would have betrayed her.

Nor were matters much improved when the animal's resentment subsided, as it presently did. The sun had been on that side of the glen throughout the afternoon, and the rock still retained its warmth. Attracted by this, the snake uncoiled, and established itself at full length on the ledge, half asleep, but ominously vigilant even thus.

What was to be done ?

Clearly, nothing at present. Probably there was no serious risk ; Paulina had withdrawn out of harm's way, and, as night approached, the intruder would retire of its own accord. But meanwhile she was a prisoner ; to attempt escape would be mere insanity. So she seated herself as she best might on the floor of the cavern ; heartily wishing that the occhio had perished from the face of the globe, but

not abandoning herself to any extremity of terror.

But to Veronica matters looked very different. Here before her, in actual shape and substance, was one of the “scellerati;”—the accursed spirits of the cavern!

“Misericordia, che spettacolo! perdittissime! Cielo, cielo! Paolina, figliuola mia; Paolina! Ohime!” Half-a-score more such ejaculations, and then Veronica succumbed; fled as for life; along the ravine, up the steep pitch of hill, through the olive-grounds; pausing only when she reached the nearest cottages.

Here, at length, affection came to her aid. Some of the field-labourers had come in, and to these Veronica appealed, urging them to return with her to the spot. But quite fruitlessly; falling dusk as it was, few of them cared to do so, and those who volunteered were detained by their wives. “Ah! nò, nò, per carità! per amor del

cielo! Poco bene, poco bene! Basta! If she must defy providence, why help her? have you none dear to you?"

Veronica's anxiety could be sustained no longer, and she started for the glen alone; a trifling distance, but now, as it seemed, interminable; who can gauge the retarding force of fear? Love may do battle with it, but it hurls a feeble weapon, recoiling from the viewless panoply of its antagonist. And when the Bocca was at length reached, there was a new terror;—fluttering in the twilight, her eye detected a light drapery. What further sorcery was being practised upon her?

But Paulina's voice broke the spell. The snake had retired at last, and the *détenue* was released; somewhat cramped by her late position, but none the worse otherwise.

Veronica was re-assured at last, and as they walked home together became radiant.

She had achieved a crusade; routed the powers of evil on their own ground; driven them into flight and exile! And, she had what she came for; the "occhio." The book had been dropped in her first terror; now she had it again fast and safe, stored with the priceless flowers, the medicament of faltering love. And within the next twenty-four hours, before Paulina left Amalfi, these would be dried and sent to her, Veronica intimated, by a trusty messenger.

All was thus over; the adventure, such as it was, offering no results proportionate to the alarm it had excited. No perceptible results, at the time, of any kind.

But it was attended with one consequence, and that is why we have narrated it. *Paulina met her foster-brother, Giuseppe Sonzi.* He had come over in the evening,

as his mother presumed he would, after finishing his day's work at Amalfi; and the adventure in the Bocca, changing afternoon to sundown, had delayed Paulina's departure concurrently. Hence their meeting.

Of small moment that too, as far as present appearances went. Paulina was pleased to see her old acquaintance; and, be the claims of Carlotta what they might, he fully reciprocated the feeling. Such beauty as Paulina's was not to be seen every day; the playmate of childhood had developed into something which brought out to the surface the latent artist-soul of the young Italian.

But still all this was of passing interest only. It was dusk now; and Giuseppe, who was compelled to return to Amalfi that night, would have the honour and pleasure of escorting this fair vision home; then they would part, probably for ever.

Unimportant enough, apparently, that brief companionship !

But out of life's least considerable details are often composed its annals for good or evil. The associate of half-an-hour has implanted impulses which outlast our own epoch. From the casually-dropped word the darkest of tragedies has evolved itself.

CHAPTER XIII.

“And so, Paolina?” said her foster-brother, as they walked back to Amalfi together in the starlight, conversing on a variety of topics. He had always called her by her Christian name, and certainly could not abstain now, with that fair face beside him, and the light figure leaning on his arm; occasionally, when the path was rough, clinging to it for additional support. “So, Paolina?”

“So what, Giuseppe?”

“Why, you and the madre have been after the occhio, have you?”

“Veronica wished it,” said Paulina care-

lessly, recollecting how lightly she herself set by the acquisition.

“The madre believes in it,” said Giuseppe; “it is part of her creed, you know, as much as the saints and the ever-blessed Virgin are. So I wouldn’t undeceive her about it, any more than I would about them. It would be cruel, don’t you think so?”

“But you are not an infidel?”

“I believe in myself,” said Giuseppe; “and I believe in Carlotta, as far as one can in any woman.”

“For shame, Giuseppe!”

“But I don’t know that I believe much else,” continued the doctor, unabashed. “I think I might have done so, once. My little sister who died, Filippa, you remember her; I know she went to heaven; and if I ever get there, it will be from her coming and singing to me, as she does even now, sometimes; songs with that still

voice in them, like the wind among the rushes. I did believe in God and good then ; but padre Giacinto has driven it quite out of me."

"What has he done?"

"More than I should care to tell you. The last time I met him he was driving over here from Amalfi, with his gilt angels in a cart, and himself three parts drunk; but that is nothing to his other doings. However, it was not all padre Giacinto. The anatomy schools don't help a man."

"They must be very shocking," said Paulina.

"Rather the other way, Paolina; they are too interesting; give one the key to so many secrets of nature that one comes to think of nerves and muscles as if they were the only forces. Perhaps that's why, in the Church states, they won't let you dissect; the students have to learn their subject from wax models, and curious

learning it must be. Fancy a wax model of cellular tissue! But about this occhio d'oro; what are you going to do with it?"

"Use it, perhaps," said Paulina. "There is no knowing."

"Really! Well be careful, that is all."

"Why careful? do you believe in its properties? I only spoke in jest."

"Believe in them?" said Giuseppe, in a tone of intense scorn; "believe that this flower inspires love; animates the cold, wins back the faithless? Not I indeed. It passes any force in nature or art to do that."

"But why do you caution me then, if the thing is harmless?"

"I did not say that, Paolina. It is not harmless. Fortunately our girls here have no great occasion for it; husbands are steady; it is not like Naples or Paris. Besides, if they ever do give a dose it is in fear and trembling; as much as would

cover a lira, and that only as a sort of amusement; they would be frightened at anything more. And a pinch now and then does no great harm."

"Anything more would then?" Paulina asked.

Her companion shrugged his shoulders. "It would not destroy life," he said; "at least, not for a long time. But it would destroy, or at least endanger, something else."

"What do you mean, Giuseppe?"

The doctor touched his own forehead significantly. "It would act there," he said; "act upon the brain. Produce, if taken in any quantity, what we call aphasia."

"What is that?"

"It is one of the things which modern science has learnt to classify. Formerly, half-a-dozen disorders were referred to the same head, and probably this would have

been called lethargy. But it is really quite distinct. 'Loss of speech,' the word means ; but, as a medical term, it includes a great deal more ; the loss of speech is almost the last symptom."

"It comes on gradually then?"

"Yes, first of all the memory begins to fail ; you forget persons, places, facts. Then the mind becomes enfeebled altogether. And then, lastly, the utterance is affected ; you can't speak, or won't ; for the 'won't' is really at the bottom of the whole."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, I mean that the faculties are not really gone, only the patient won't use them. It is like a case we had at the fanciullo esposto, . . . But this is dull talk for you, Paolina," said her companion, interrupting himself.

"No, go on ; I like to understand things. What case do you mean?"

“That of a little girl at the hospital,” said Giuseppe: “she had a dumb spirit, the matron said; stopped talking all of a sudden. Nothing would induce her to open her lips.”

“They should have made her,” said Paulina.”

“Not so easy, Paolina: one man may lead a horse to water, but a hundred can’t make him drink. Speak she would not, or do anything else; she was like a born natural.”

“But they might have punished her for it,” Paulina suggested.

“So *I* thought,” replied her companion. “‘Felicia,’ I said,—that was the matron’s name,—‘you go to the butcher’s stall above here, and buy one of the birch brooms they flog the meat with; it is a specific in this kind of malady. The spirit will be exorcised directly.’”

“And was the broom successful?”

“A total failure. For two years, birches or sugarplums, kind words or cross ones, the child never uttered an articulate sound. Then, quite suddenly again, she began talking as if nothing had happened. That is the sort of effect the madre’s love-potion would have; only it would be real aphasia, not sham.”

“How do you know?” asked Paulina.

“For the best of reasons. The summer before last, a girl here did overstep the limits with her lover;—they wern’t married. She got jealous and gave him some good-sized doses, and I was called in; and found him in the most incomprehensible state, until she confessed. I burnt the rest of the stuff, and in a week he was all right again. But it might have been most serious.”

“It looks such an innocent flower,” said Paulina.

“None the better on that account,

Paolina; it is like those pretty, sweet-faced boys one sees; you never know what is in them. As to flowers, hemlock looks innocent enough, but if you and I were to sup off it to-night, we should make a sensation in Amalfi! However, for this *occhio* to do any harm the dose must be pretty vigorous."

"It might be useful now and then," said Paulina, with more interest than she had hitherto shown. "Supposing that you wanted . . . wanted any one, I mean, to forget some particular thing; to lose all knowledge of it, as if it had never existed?"

Paulina was thinking of herself; speaking half in jest and half in earnest; wishing that it *were* possible to obliterate one page of the past from her own memory. But Giuseppe had no clue to these thoughts.

"You draw from my premises," he said, laughing, "a conclusion which they do not

warrant: the poor occhio might turn out to be a love-potion after all. If a girl were deserted and could not win back her lover for herself, the next best thing would be to make him forget her rival! Ha! ha! But, Paolina."

"Yes, Guiseppe?"

"Don't you, in a rash moment, amuse yourself with any experiments of the kind. It would be playing with edged tools. Constitutions differ; what is innocent enough in one case might be fatal in another. A single overdose, and you *might* turn some man or woman into a helpless idiot. Don't you think, after all, you had better burn the stuff too, when my mother sends it?"

"You need not be afraid," said Paulina. "I spoke quite at random."

So the subject dropped, and Amalfi was reached soon afterwards. Paulina presented her cheek to her foster-brother at

parting; and after a cordial farewell they parted for their respective destinations.

“She will be all right,” said Giuseppe to himself the same evening, as he thought over their conversation. “It isn’t every woman I would have told about the occhio; not about its real properties, that is; but in her position there can be no risk. It is a curious little plant. Curious, too, how little known it is; I daresay that I and one or two others hereabouts are the only medical men acquainted with it. How would it be to write a scientific notice? it could be easily done, and might bring the author some reputation. Let me see. . . .

“But no, no;” he continued, after a minute’s pondering over the form his work should assume: “no, I won’t be tempted. There are plenty of poisons without adding to them; and although I don’t believe in

father Giacinto and his guilt angels, I do believe that we came into the world to do as much good, and as little harm, as we can. And this is such a subtle fellow too; so gradual, so certain; betraying itself neither by taste, odour, nor colour! No, no, let well alone!"

"And so she is to be married, *la bella Paolina*," Giuseppe went on after a further pause in his soliloquy; "and to a wealthy Englishman! I hope they will be happy: she is a beautiful creature. Yes, beautiful; and no fool either: but I do wonder if she is sincere. She has not the true eyes of my little Carlotta!"

Whereupon the doctor diverged into recollections of his lady-love, in the course of which he fell happily asleep.

Two days later, Paulina had left Amalfi, bearing with her the dried flowers, which

Veronica had sent over the evening previously. Paulina did not open the box, and felt some doubt as to encumbering herself with it ; not from Giuseppe's description of the contents, but as an useless appendage.

A passing sentiment eventually decided in its favour. The present would be some memento of the Dragone gorge and its associations : those of Paulina's last visit but one there, the afternoon spent with Stephen Luxmoor. Yes ; let it accompany her on her travels.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FEW more weeks, and Paulina was at Stanton Court. The marriage took place on the day fixed; some foreign capitals were visited; then Charles Rayner, still enraptured, brought his bride to the paternal roof.

Philip Rayner's wish was gratified; he had once more a daughter-in-law. One whom he could accept as such; not like that other woman, John's wife, who had forced herself, to her own confusion and that of every one else, into the Rayner

alliance. One whose issue, should there be such, might succeed in right of the existing settlement, to the exclusion of all progeny of the disgraced elder son. To all appearance, Philip Rayner had everything he could desire.

There is something, however, very strange in the phenomena of human nature under these conditions. We have no space to analyze ; the essayist or divine might do it, but we must stay our hand. But, why is it, that for a man to have all he asks for is the surest recipe for making him discontented? Easy to say that he at once wants something further ; like Grattan's definition of a competence, "a little more than one has." But, nine times out of ten, the man does not want more : he has plenty ; too much : and yet the "too much" is not the explanation either.

Nearer the truth, perhaps, to say that in

every human soul there resides a strange consciousness; that of its own unspeakable worth. Of the more solemn reasons for this, the price which has been paid to give it this value, it may know nothing; but the consciousness is still there; the void still unfilled. Human passions are incommensurate with their objects; we lavish the energies of an archangel on the scrapings of a beggar's hovel.—Pile the dross of wealth together; pamper ambition, and luxury, and self-will;—beyond and behind them all remains the craving for the Infinite! And in this lies our punishment. The objects of our choice fail in gratifying it; we loathe them, and become wretched ourselves.

And Philip Rayner was no exception to this rule. He had had his own way; enjoyed that satisfaction as few men are indulged with it; and now simply realised that the result was—gravel and ashes!

Gladly now would he have retraced his steps. But this was just what, as things stood, he could not do; he was bound hand and foot. John would not come back, because it was impossible that his father could summon him; false shame would interpose. In asserting his own will so long, Philip had made it objective; a law of being, external and paramount to himself!

But this was not all: as often happens in such circumstances, the secondary agent had stepped in. We forge the chains for ourselves; but some one else helps to rivet them. Philip Rayner had dismissed John, and John's wife. And, in their place, he had imported into his home—Paulina.

From the moment that *she* set foot there, such power as he still retained of reversing the past, restoring his own happiness and the rights of those whom he had made

outcasts was swept from him. Not consciously, or avowedly, of course, but in fact. It was Paulina's especial business to see that nothing of this kind happened; and she was quite equal to the undertaking!

Two main impediments presented themselves. The least serious arose from her step-daughter, Evelyn Rayner.

Evelyn had remained at Chigwell until the end of the hunting season; the inamorati, the four male Alsagers, being dispersed in different directions, so that "the Beeches" were neutral ground. Then, when the last horn was wound at Stanton Court and sobriety resumed its reign, she returned there as arranged, Paulina arriving as bride a few weeks later. Evelyn was prepared, after some struggle, to receive her kindly, and did so; but there was little sympathy between them; the natures were incompatible. And in any

scheming about the property Evelyn would be an undoubted adversary. Their interests in regard to it, indeed, lay in the same direction, but this was of little moment; the mere fact that there was scheming would secure Evelyn's determined opposition; she would revolt against every suggestion of it. Paulina felt this instinctively.

This was one difficulty; but a still greater one seemed to threaten in Philip Rayner himself. Paulina did not feel at all sure how she stood with him. He was affectionate and interested enough, studied her comfort, and evidently admired her. But he had evinced no special liking for her; there was no rapport between them. And yet, without this, influence of any kind was out of the question. How was the rapport to be established?

Eventually, accident favoured her.

CHAPTER XV.

WE have spoken of Philip Rayner's extreme sensitiveness. Side by side with his strong will, his social and genial instincts in most ways, lay this quality; singularly contrasted with all of them, but none the less real on that account. It was matter of temperament. Temperament and character are often confounded, but they are essentially distinct things; we create the latter by an unintermitting, uniform process, daily and hourly through our lives; the former we inherit, and it is capricious accordingly. And Philip Rayner had inherited this sensitiveness. Unkindly com-

ment, even the chance word or jest, would pierce him to the quick; he would brood over them; shrink, like a wounded animal, from again encountering them. It was to some morbid feeling of the kind that John's proscription had really been due; the dread of what would be said of the *mésalliance* by friends and neighbours; the amusement of some, the sneers and contempt of others.

Now it fell out, some months after Paulina's arrival at Stanton Court, that a disaster overtook Philip Rayner. Nothing very serious in itself, but one which this constituent in his nature aggravated beyond all reason.

Philip had never known a day's illness; held medicine and its practitioners in abhorrence. But he was driven into the doctor's hands now. In his plenitude of strength, an unexpected foe struck him. Very lightly; more as if testing their

respective strengths than in actual conflict. But a stroke was delivered ;—and it was that of paralysis.

Philip speedily rallied from this : his constitution was good, and the enemy retreated for the time being. That the attack would recur was probable enough ; it might do so at any time, and next time, might be more serious. But, for the present, recovery was complete ; mind and body the same as before, or substantially so.

The same as before, but with one exception ; one foot-print of the invader's presence uneffaced. The face remained partially distorted ; the mouth, in particular, drawn down on one side ; rather noticeably so. And with Philip this meant mischief. It supplied the exact materials for a sensitive nature to prey upon !

Early in his convalescence, he had desired a glass to be brought to his bed-

side, and the impression he received from it had never left him. While improvement seemed possible, this was in abeyance; now, it recurred in full force. The “vacant simper” which he had seen, or believed himself to have seen, was intolerable. And the more intolerable it was, the more it began to haunt him !

It is a calamitous thing for a man when this happens ; when he not only creates a brain-spectre, but gives it place and domicile in his daily life. The chances are that it will not be content with this ! There may be no mental disorder ; there was none with Philip Rayner ; the end, probably, had loomed in view, one which overthrows mind as well as body ; but, for the present, intellect, apprehension, judgment, were sound as ever. But what it did mean, even in the present, was that

he had brought into the field an adversary who was more than a match for all three !

And this was a subtle one ; it cut him off from all escape. Society would have cured the evil, and Philip liked society ; but he began to withdraw from it now. That “ idiotic ” look ; something on which every eye must be fixed ;—how should he face his fellows ? It was Byron’s club-foot over again.

Inevitably, too, things occurred to aggravate this. Philip would see some glance directed towards him ; compassionate enough, but that did not mend matters. Or he would overhear this or that fragment of conversation. “ Much changed since his illness.” “ Rather a serious attack, I fancy.” “ Left its traces.” Casual words, but gall and wormwood to the hapless listener !

The last time this occurred was out

hunting ; for the season had come back to winter again, and towards the close of winter ; nine or ten months after Paulina's marriage. Philip left the field almost immediately, and never hunted again.

Then, he began to shrink from other society ; the house, hitherto open to all comers, was almost shut up ; from the two or three friends who did come he secluded himself great part of the day. There had been a further, very slight, warning, which helped in this. Quiet was recommended for the present ; the visitors left ; and no one was asked in their place. The family remained in solitary possession.

And then, as time wore on, came the final change. The more Philip nursed his solitude, the more he confirmed his "fixed idea." *Crescit indulgens sibi dirus hydrops.*

Upon the morbid tendencies of the last few months supervened an acute stage. He had escaped from general society, but what was he the better for it?

Equally painful that his infirmity should exhibit itself to his own household! What the man shrank from, in his inmost soul, was observation of *any* kind. He longed to hide himself from all eyes!

He did so, as far as might be.

Withdrew from the home circle, except at meals. Gradually, on one excuse or other, absented himself from these also; took the meal, lunch or dinner, as it might be, in his own library. Ultimately, came to occupy that apartment exclusively, fitting up an adjoining one as a bedroom. Shut himself up, as if Stanton Court had been Millbank! And there was no preventing this. John would have done it; by force or fraud he would have stopped the self-torture. But John was not there;

the stubborn will which had banished him had brought its own chastisement.

Meanwhile, even in his two rooms, Philip Rayner could not be absolutely alone; some intercourse with his species was inevitable. And the person whose companionship he found most endurable, almost exclusively so, was his son Charles's wife.—*Paulina*.

Because she had more sympathy with him?

Assuredly not; but that was the very thing. Everybody else showed a consciousness of something wrong; dropped their eyes or averted them altogether. Paulina looked him straight in the face. Somewhat to his disquietude at first, but that soon passed; and then the relief was intense: palpable that she was not thinking of him the least. The very thing he

desired! He had acquired of late a nervous habit; incessantly raising one hand to his mouth, as if to conceal it. But with Paulina he forgot to do this; he felt almost entirely at his ease with her; free from embarrassment and discomfort, as he was with no one else. And this she soon discovered. It was no contrivance of her own; the idea could not possibly have occurred to her. But by all means let her profit by it!

There was small difficulty in doing so; the natural result followed. A month or two more went on, and she became practically Philip's sole companion. His valet, Milward, attended when required, but no other domestic. Of the other two inmates of the house, Charles Rayner kept himself aloof, mainly at Paulina's suggestion; "his presence seemed to irritate his

father." This was true enough ; but, even without assigning any reason, Paulina's suggestions were rapidly acquiring the force of law with Charles Rayner. And Evelyn was self-excluded also. She was compelled to admit, although sorely against her will, that her visits to the library were a source of uneasiness there ; and she refrained from them accordingly. This disposed of the home party. Out of doors, there was the medical attendant, a somewhat heavy man, who called occasionally, once a fortnight or thereabouts ; not oftener, unless specially summoned. And this was all. Paulina remained mistress of the field.

Not indeed in any sense " mistress," as between herself and Philip. He was still more drawn to her than he had been ; grateful for the tact which enabled him to

enjoy her society without discomfort ; grateful for the society itself. It was pleasant to have his son's wife, whose beauty he admired unaffectedly, bestowing this companionship upon him. No nursing was required ; even after his second slight attack things had not come to this : such trifling offices as were required she discharged womanlywise, deftly and noiselessly. But in other matters her assistance was valuable. She laid herself out to the best advantage ; amused Philip with description and anecdote ; read to him ; still more frequently, wrote for him ; checked the accounts of the property ; rendered efficient aid in twenty ways. And to this he did respond ; he had never been so helped before. His amanuensis, or private secretary, or whatever else Paulina might be called, had relieved him of what might have been a serious difficulty. He appreciated this ; liked her, trusted her ; he could hardly do otherwise.

But, this was all. A hair's-breadth beyond this, a moment's subjugation of one will to the other, such as Paulina had possibly hoped for, was out of all question. She felt this more every day. Even as regarded the business details in which Philip accepted her aid, he entirely held his own; it was mere dictation; neither advice or opinion of hers were ever asked. As far as *present* results went, she had gained nothing.

But, from another point of view, one which took in future as well as present, there *was* gain; and it may be compendiously stated. Adapting a well-known legal phrase, she was "committee of the person." Philip Rayner had chosen to immure himself, and had made her custodian; his organ of communication with the outer world; the person through whom he saw, spoke, acted. Whatever he wished done, she was the doer. The volition still

exclusively his own. The execution as entirely—hers!

The position was decidedly of some value.

CHAPTER XVI.

Things stood as described in the last chapter, when an unexpected event occurred: unexpected, that is, at Stanton Court. John Rayner lost his wife.

We have already spoken of her declining health. She had passed one winter at Dawlish; the winter in which Malcolm, then just nineteen, had commenced his Cambridge residence, and in the Christmas vacation of which he and Evelyn first met. Then came the spring, and Paulina's marriage; her establishment at Stanton Court; Philip Rayner's attack and recovery in the ensuing winter; now it was early spring

again. But with this second spring the feeble life closed. No letters came to Stanton Court, of course. But Philip Rayner saw by the Times that his eldest son was a widower.

The news affected him most powerfully. Had Paulina supposed herself to be acquiring any influence, advancing one step beyond general liking and trust on her father-in-law's part, she would have been undeceived now. The ground was pre-occupied. Palpable enough that the master key to Philip Rayner's heart, the only one to which it would respond in any shape, was in the hands of his son, the proscribed John!

No one hitherto had entertained the least suspicion of this: it was a secret which Philip had shut out even from his own consciousness. But this could not go on now. In the father's inner life, the exile, the absentee had been, all these years, the

only real presence ; now the presence would step forward, and claim external recognition also !

Yes, and much more than recognition. Those two or three lines in the obituary column led to something far beyond this ; a world of new suggestion.

“ Exiled ; ” “ absent ! ” Why should John be so any longer ? The woman was dead now, gone to her account. She had parted father and son, parted them hopelessly and finally, as it had hitherto seemed ; but that was all over now. The mere memory need not do it !

But there was her child ; Malcolm. Very true. Philip had not forgotten that ; in the abstract he would certainly have preferred that this offspring of the *mésalliance* should not have existed. Still, one child was not like half-a-dozen : this solitary boy need be no impediment.

And what impediment then was there ?

A momentous question this, and one which did not admit of immediate reply : some days passed, and Philip was still occupied with it. In its discussion, he almost forgot himself; forgot his infirmity, and the voluntary seclusion to which it had led: too habitual to be broken through on the moment, but continued mainly as habit. Under the pressure of this new interest it might be discarded altogether.

Paulina saw *this* risk, and was much disquieted by it. To that other, and still greater peril, John's restoration to favour, she had no clue. Philip's mind was at work upon something, that was obvious enough; but she was far indeed from suspecting that it had reference to his eldest son. Still less did she understand, or could she have understood, the totally new point of view in which the death of that son's wife had placed matters. What she

did see, and what was disturbing enough, was that such hold upon her father-in-law as she possessed was in danger of slipping from her. And yet, what could be done?

Once more fortune favoured her.

The excitement which Philip had undergone again brought threatenings, and Dr. Alston was sent for. His orders were imperative. The patient must keep as quiet as possible. Specifically, he must see no one whom he could avoid seeing; and must abstain from agitation and undue thought of all kinds.

The first half of the order was easily obeyed: Philip remained patiently enough in Paulina's charge. But that other requisition, "to abstain from thinking;" that was difficult.

Wholly impossible. Backwards and forwards, almost incessantly, Philip's brain

toiled in discussing its one question : why should not John come back ? What hindered it ? The overtures could not be made directly by Philip himself, no doubt ; the Rayner nature forbade that. But why should they not be elicited from John, as in old times ?

Plenty of disputes there had been then between father and son ; culminating in a separation not quite so long-lived as the present, but quite as absolute while it lasted. But then, some friend had always interposed ; held the gates of penitence ajar for the offender. Much better than ajar. He had not to wait for admission on the outside, not even to steal in at un-awares ; with a sudden recoil, they flung themselves wide open for him. And why not now ?

Had things been otherwise, Philip would have taken horse forthwith ; ridden over, —well, say, to Serjeant Everitt, one of the

best fellows in the world, and the constant referee in those old disputes. And if not Everitt, there were others. Easy enough.

Ah! but he must not defy Dr. Alston like that. Must not even, although equally easy, send for Everitt or any one else to come over to Stanton Court. Philip cared little for Dr. Alston, but he had come to believe in his warnings. And, just at present, there was something in himself which he had never felt before; something which satisfied him that if he did not obey orders, there would be a catastrophe. "Overtures" would be cut short altogether!

Besides, another idea occurred to him. Why need he go out-of-doors for what he wanted? Here, beneath his own roof, was the very person; this intelligent, handsome, helpful daughter-in-law of his! Why should not she be peace-maker? write to John, not in direct terms, of course, but as those other friends had done; sug-

gesting, as from herself, that any advances on his side would be met so very much more than half-way? A delicate commission, no doubt, but she had ample tact for it; the most natural and suitable person in every way.

Philip quickly made up his mind: the bell was rung, and Milward appeared.

“Mrs. Charles Rayner?”

She was somewhere in the grounds, the man believed. She would probably be back soon, as the carriage was ordered early to-day.

Very well. When she returned, his compliments, and would she kindly come to him in the library?

The door however had hardly closed behind Milward when a sudden doubt occurred; he was on the point of recalling his message.

Would Paulina do this for him?

The father's heart had leapt towards his first-born. The barrier was down between them; down at last; formal obstacles, so to speak, all that still interposed. He should see his son once more before . . . before he died. As to any further result, any consequences which might ensue on John's return, he had never even given them a thought.

But now, they flashed upon him; return would mean restitution. John would come back, rehabilitated in his old rights, eldest son for all purposes; his boy, Malcolm, heir after him. Charles and Paulina, with their issue, if any—as yet, no such indications had presented themselves—must be indefinitely postponed; not left without ample provision, that would be matter of course, but reduced to their natural position of the younger branch merely. *Would* Paulina pen the letter which would lead to this?

But, the next moment, Philip felt ashamed of his doubt. He judged other natures by his own; generous himself to a fault, he could not understand those of a lower stamp. Had it scattered his own future to the winds, he would have healed such a breach between father and son; why should not Paulina do the same? Heartless in him even to have questioned it!

No, let her come. Practically, indeed, there was no one else; Evelyn was too young; as to Charles, he was a dolt; more listless, more unsympathising than ever. And time pressed too. Every twenty-four hours, the warning from within made itself more plainly audible: a chime, sounding faintly at first in the distance, but striking the ear, with each repetition, more fully and distinctly.

“Let her come,” Philip said to himself. “After all, she can but refuse, and then I

shall discover that I have been mistaken in her. But I do not believe she will refuse.”

CHAPTER XVII.

AN exquisite day in April, near the middle of the month. Everywhere the tenderest of leaf, the brightest of blossom; every copse vocal with song, every field breathing fragrance.

The library which Philip Rayner had so long occupied looked across the valley. Immediately below it were the shrubberies; then the ground sloped to meadows, irrigated from the chalk-stream, and with sheep penned by the threads of bright water; above these a spur of down, fringed with beechwood hangers.

It was a sweet, English home-view, wor-

shipful to eye and heart; but Paulina took little note of it as she entered. Her thoughts were busied elsewhere;—they had been so throughout the walk from which she had just returned; engaged with a far distant scene.

A scene in the past. This was the anniversary of her wedding-day; its first return; twelve months before, at the English chapel in Naples, she had given her hand to Charles Rayner. Paulina recollected every incident of that morning. The lazzaroni on the chapel steps. The meanly-fitted place of worship, one of those which disgrace the English faith abroad. The curtailed, half-gabbed service. The bridal cortége, and its spectators; her mother's pained look; the enraptured gaze of the man whom she had chosen to be her partner through life. Recollected all this; and, still more vividly, recalled her own part in the ceremony.

The treacherous heart knew itself; the veil was lifted, as with compassionate purpose, until life's probation is quite over, it at times is. Every vow she uttered that day twelvemonth had been a falsehood; every prayer, a mockery of the Being in whose name it was breathed. Was it too late to repent, even thus?

Too late, in one sense. As she turned to close the door, the imageries of the past were swept from her; the present reasserted itself. Some hour or two this before Philip's usual hour of sending for her; what did the summons mean? Thought and interest became absorbed in the answer.

Meanwhile Philip Rayner had not forgotten the anniversary either. He rose from the table, and drew her affectionately towards him. Usually he was an undemonstrative man, specially chary of expressions of regard; he had kissed his

daughter-in-law on her arrival at Stanton Court, but never since. But he did so now, pressing the wan, distorted lips on her forehead; and she kissed his cheek in return. She was looking very beautiful to-day. The figure had slightly rounded since her marriage, giving its outline the maturity of womanhood; the complexion too, exquisite as it always was, had gained by her English residence; added softness and delicacy to its tints. Philip admired her as he had never done before. He almost loved her; trusted her, at all events, quite implicitly.

He resumed his seat, and handed Paulina what he had been writing when she entered, a cheque for £200.

"A wedding-day present from the old man," he said; "I hope the twelve months have passed happily to yourself. To us, you have made them very pleasant."

"Oh! how generous of you!" Paulina

exclaimed. In spite of herself, she was genuinely touched for the moment.

"It is trifling enough," Philip answered, but it may purchase you some little pleasure or the other; some acknowledgment of the life you have brought to our dull house, as well as of your goodness to myself. Besides, I have a selfish motive; I want your help to-day rather specially. Will you give it me?"

"With all my heart," said Paulina. She spoke lightly, but a tumult of emotions was in her heart; something in Philip's manner arrested her at once. What could be coming?

She was so agitated that the cheque which had given her so much pleasure the minute before fell from her hand; she had forgotten all about it. Philip took it up.

"Put that in your purse, my dear," he said, "and then come and sit near me here."

Paulina obeyed. Philip's agitation

equalled her own, but he controlled himself by a strong effort.

“I have made up my mind,” he said in a low voice. “I must see my eldest son; see him at once. And you must fetch him here for me.”

“My eldest son!” “Fetch him here!” Paulina echoed the words to herself, automatically.

It had come then at last; the worst, the very worst! And how unexpectedly, how crushingly; without signal or preparation of any kind! Paulina saw the full consequences, although Philip had not: they rose up before her as if the revoking instrument were already signed and sealed, John and his son in undisputed possession, herself ousted from all that she had sinned for! What could she do, or say? And yet, something must be done; he said, at any rate: and this, on the very spur of the moment!

Fortunately for her, Philip continued to speak.

“I have been a hard father to him,” he said; “exacted the last mite in his punishment; but it is over now. One sees things differently at a time like this. The sands are running very low with me now, my child. Alston does not tell me so, but something else does; this morning, more than ever before.”

Paulina ventured one glance at the speaker; and one was enough. Strange that she should have failed to notice this herself! Written palpably on cheek and brow was the evidence of a great change, the impending death-warrant. It might be days, might be only hours, no saying: but there was the fact. Could she only gain time; tide over this emergency!

Paulina's resolve was taken on the instant. Oppose him? advocate her own claims? endeavour to divert this new cur-

rent of feeling? Worse than useless; confidence would be at an end with the first syllable she uttered. No; let *that* be maintained at all hazards. Confidence meant time; time during which something—she knew not what—might occur; during which any chance that offered might be utilized. Forfeit her present position, and she would be out of the game altogether!

She replied without a moment's delay. Critical as the decision had been, it had occupied no perceptible interval: Philip had gone on speaking by his own choice; and as he concluded, Paulina was ready with her reply.

“You are alarming yourself without reason, sir,” she said, referring to Philip's last words; “this little threatening will pass like the others, and you will feel yourself again in a day or two. But I could be almost glad of it if it is to have this effect. Do you mean, really mean, that

my brother-in-law is to . . . I mean, that all this unhappiness is to end now?"

"Do you wish it?"

"It is the one thing I have wished since I came to England," Paulina answered.

"Of course, neither Charles nor myself could ever speak of it; you would have resented our doing so. But we shall be so intensely glad! You said that I was to 'fetch' John," Paulina continued. "How do you mean?"

Philip hesitated: when he did reply, it was in an embarrassed, nervous tone. "There had better be . . . be some third person," he said, "at least in the first instance. You see, it is a good many years since, and I do not quite know, . . . that is, things might go wrong, if I wrote with my own hand. I thought it possible that . . ."

"That I might write for you," said Paulina, completing the sentence. "That

I will do with all my heart. Shall it be in my own name, or yours?"

"In your own name, I think. You can tell him, you see, that there is a good deal of change; that my health is much broken lately: put this as if it had occurred to you to write it yourself. Then you might add . . ."

Again he hesitated, and again Paulina looked up at him; a steady, unembarrassed look this time; her nerves had quieted themselves. Everything depended upon this. Philip was about to place himself in her hands; to give her, it might be, the very chance she desired!

He resumed at length, although still with frequent pauses. The outworks were mastered; but the old pride, the old indomitable will, had intrenched themselves deep and fast within; the ground had to be won inch by inch.

"You might tell him," he went on,

“that you think now, . . . if he cared to come home, that is;—he and his boy, Malcolm, I mean; you had better put that in;—that you think there would . . . think there would be no difficulty; that, that, things would be forgiven; overlooked. You will know how to put this. You will do it for me, Paulina?”

“*Most gladly.*”

“And do it at once?”

“By all means, if you wish it; my only doubt is whether you should agitate yourself with this at present. Why not wait until you are stronger again?”

Paulina caught at every straw;—anything to gain time, and this was the first chance which offered. But the old man shook his head.

“That will never be,” he said; “whatever is done must be done immediately. Paulina, I must see my son once more; I cannot die without it. Here is the ad-

dress," he added. He had cut out the obituary notice from the Times: now he took it from his pocket-book, and placed it in her hands.

"There is one thing I ought to mention," he added. "I am asking you to do what is against your own interest, to some extent. If John comes back, he will be the eldest son once more, and his boy after him. Ample provision shall be made for yourself and Charles; that, you may quite leave to me; but the present settlement . . ."

Again Paulina interrupted him. Whatever chances might offer later on, she had one rôle in the present, and only one; instant, absolute acquiescence.

"Do not speak of that, Sir," she said. "Of course that will follow; my brother-in-law will take his proper position at once: I shall write all the more willingly on that account. When is the letter to be sent?"

“I should like it posted this afternoon, if possible.”

“It shall be,” Paulina answered. “I will begin at once. I will write it in my own room, and bring it down to you.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN less than an hour, Paulina had despatched her task, and the result was placed in Philip's hands. The composition had cost her little pains; it was not *that* she was concerned about; a third of the time would have sufficed. But the interval had been busily occupied. Vain attempts at shaping out her own line of conduct; each plan successively rejected, almost before it presented itself.

One thing only seemed clear: if any agency of hers could prevent it, the mis-sive must never reach its destination. How this was to be insured, Paulina could not

see; but insured it must be, if possible, at any cost. Best that she should still be guided by circumstances.

Yes, if circumstances were propitious. But there appeared small likelihood at first that they would be.

Philip read the letter carefully twice through. It satisfied him; satisfied him entirely as far as the mere document went. What he was not easy about, now that it was complete, was the mode of communication itself.

Even during Paulina's brief absence, the feelings of which he had been conscious in speaking to her had gained ground. Wholly new feelings in that breast; grief for the past; remorse; self-abasement!

"I should have written it with my own hand," he said, partly to himself, partly addressing Paulina; "I, who have done

the wrong, should have stooped to acknowledge it. My pride would not let me, I suppose! And he must come here and sue for pardon, forsooth; sue to me, who have been a task-master not a father; driven him, and his, into penury all these years; barred door and heart against him! Paulina, this letter must not go."

"Shall I write it again?"

"No, no; the fault is in my instructions, not in your penning. But that shall be mended now. Give me my desk."

Philip tore the letter to shreds as he spoke. Then he indited a few hurried lines. They ran thus.

"John, my boy, I have given you cause to curse me even by the grave of your dear wife: perhaps there more than elsewhere. But for my tyranny she might have been living now; poverty and anxiety need not have done their work. John,

forgive me, if you can. And come back, you and Malcolm; come and see me before I die. Do not delay many hours after you receive this: I shall not be here long, I think, and we have much to settle, much to talk about. John, my boy, my whole heart is with you; it always has been, really, all the time.

Your loving father,

PHILIP RAYNER."

Philip folded and directed his letter: then he placed it, almost mechanically, in an open stand with two or three others, to be dispatched at post-time as usual. Paulina looked on in blank dismay; the last chance seemed cut from her. Better almost, instead of this tame surrender, to have combated his decision in the outset; protested against John's return, against any sacrifice of her rights!

But she was relieved by Philip himself. After thinking for a moment, he took the letter from the box and gave it to her.

“I should have kept it open for you to read,” he said, “but it was hardly worth while, and might only have saddened you: the avowal of shame and guilt is for those who have incurred them, not for the innocent. But now, will you do me a further kindness?”

“With pleasure,” said Paulina. Calmly as she uttered the words, a strange feeling thrilled through her: half of terror, the pang of a great temptation, and half of wild joy. The writing had been in the first instance deputed to her; was the *despatch* of this new missive to rest with her also? And—if so?—

“I ought not to ask for anything,” Philip continued, “after treating your composition so badly. But will you post

this for me in Caversham? There would be some . . . some curiosity about it here; besides our people are careless, and I am anxious that it should not miscarry; that there should be no delay of any kind. I could send one of the men, but they would be talking perhaps."

"Do not think of doing that," said Paulina; "I will take it with pleasure. The carriage was ordered for half-past one, and I may just as well drive there as anywhere else."

"Thank you, my dear child. The old man will not trouble you much longer."

"I fear that he will," said Paulina gaily. "But now I must be getting ready; Morison never likes his horses kept at the door." Paulina was feverish with excitement; she could hardly control her impatience to quit the room; to find herself alone, with leisure to reflect on the best

means of utilizing this turn of affairs in her favour.

But she had to submit to one further detention, although a brief one. Philip called her back from the door.

“Paulina?” he said. He had risen, and was now standing in front of her; gazing into her very soul, as it were, with a prolonged scrutiny. But she did not flinch from it: she returned the gaze, calmly and steadily, with a half-smile.

Thus might Circe have looked; thus beautiful, and thus false. Proffering the unholy chalice. Stirring the odorous cedar into a blaze, while the cries of the transformed wailed through the night-shadows!

“Paulina?”

She could not trust her voice to reply, but smiled as before.

“Forgive me, child,” said the old man, “but this is life and death to me, and you

know young ladies are pre-occupied sometimes. Something in Caversham might divert your attention; it is a poor little place, but this might happen, and you know how early the post leaves. You will go there first of all?"

"I will go nowhere else."

"And you will post the letter yourself?"

"It shall not leave my hands, from this moment until it is in the box?"

"You promise me that?"

"Most solemnly." And the minute afterwards the carriage drove up to the hall-door.

For one moment, as she left the room, some vague prompting arose in Philip's mind, urging him to recall her, to despatch the letter by its usual channel. It was one of those instincts which no science has yet analyzed; which, when judgment and apprehension are both at fault, throw

across our path a last guiding ray. But the suggestion, if it amounted to such, was discarded as soon as formed. What ground had Philip for acting thus; what reason could he assign for it? To Paulina herself, it would seem a gratuitous insult.

And, in any case, it was too late now: she was already in the carriage. And, shortly afterwards, as Philip sat listening, he heard, in the still air, the sound of the lodge gates closing behind it.

“Why, Paulina!” exclaimed Evelyn the next day, as her step-mother entered the breakfast-room.—Mother and daughter were so nearly of an age, that, by the desire of the former, Evelyn always called her by her Christian name.

Paulina was late this morning; the

morning of all others when she had meant to be downstairs, not only at her usual hour but a good deal earlier. The key of the letter-bag hung by the hall-door, and Paulina intended, this day of all days, that its contents should pass through her own hands.

But nature had been too strong for her; the night had been sleepless, and the morning hours had to compensate it. She replied to her maid's call, heavily and drowsily; a minute afterwards, she was again buried in profound slumber, and the woman forbore to disturb her.

Hence it chanced that Evelyn had first possession of the letters that morning. She sorted them according to their destinations, placing on Paulina's plate one addressed to her; the only one. It was this which had led to her exclamation.

"Why, Paulina!"

"Yes? What has happened?"

“Nothing has happened,” said Evelyn; “but what have you been writing to yourself about? Surely that direction is your writing, although it is not your usual hand.”

A deep flush overspread Paulina’s cheek and forehead. Unquestionably, the address was not in her usual hand; she had disguised it, and fancied the disguise complete.

But resources were not wanting to her. She took the letter from the plate, glanced at it as unconcernedly as might be, and placed it in her pocket.

“It is from that glove shop in Bond Street,” she said. “I sent them my address on an envelope, and they have used it to post the answer.”

Nothing further passed, and Paulina conversed pleasantly enough during the rest of the meal.

It was over, at last. Observation and enquiry had both been eluded. Paulina hurried to her own room; locked and double-locked the door; and then, tearing open the envelope, reduced the contents to ashes in the flame of one of the candles on her dressing-table. Even in ashes, she was still suspicious of them. Watched until the last spark had extinguished itself. Collected the charred fragments, and let them float away, in opposite directions, from the open casement.

For in those embers had perished Philip Rayner's letter !

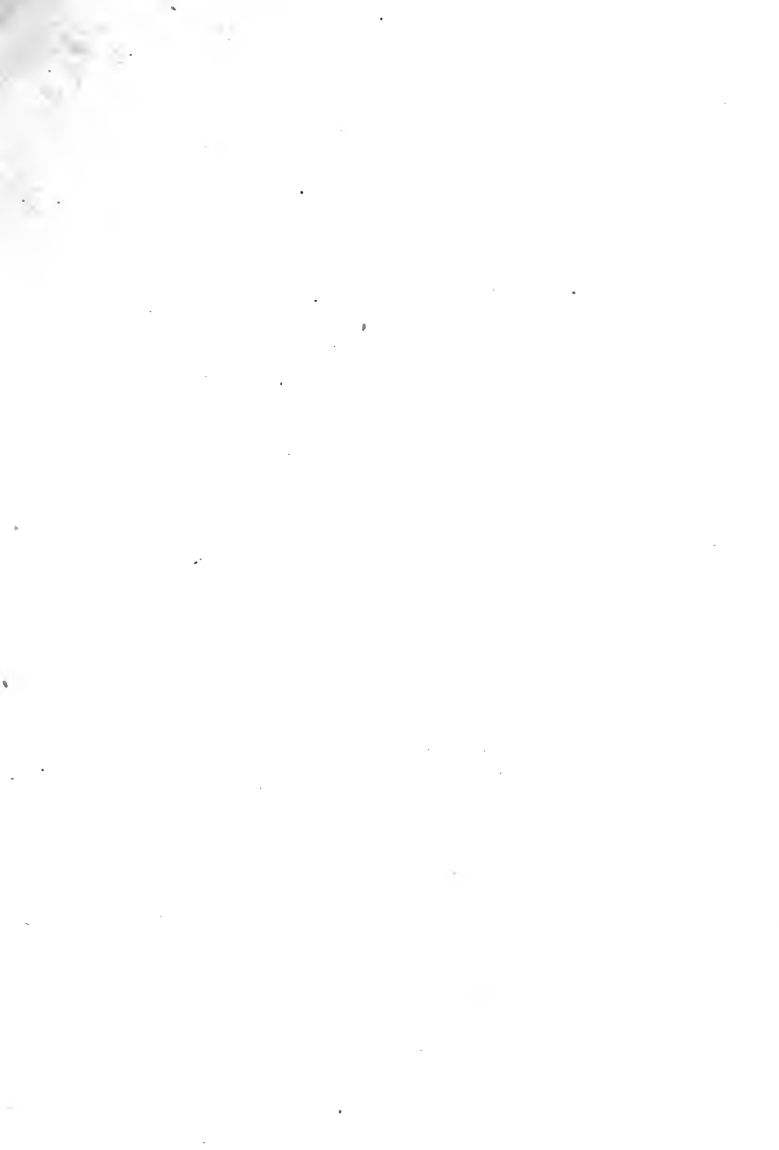
Paulina's first impulse, on leaving him the day before, had been to destroy it on the spot. But the promise she had so solemnly made was too strong for her; she dared not, by an express, direct act, give the lie to it.

The letter was posted, and by her own hand; she had engaged it should be. But

the envelope which Philip had directed was enclosed in another. And this other was addressed by Paulina—to herself!

END OF VOL I.

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